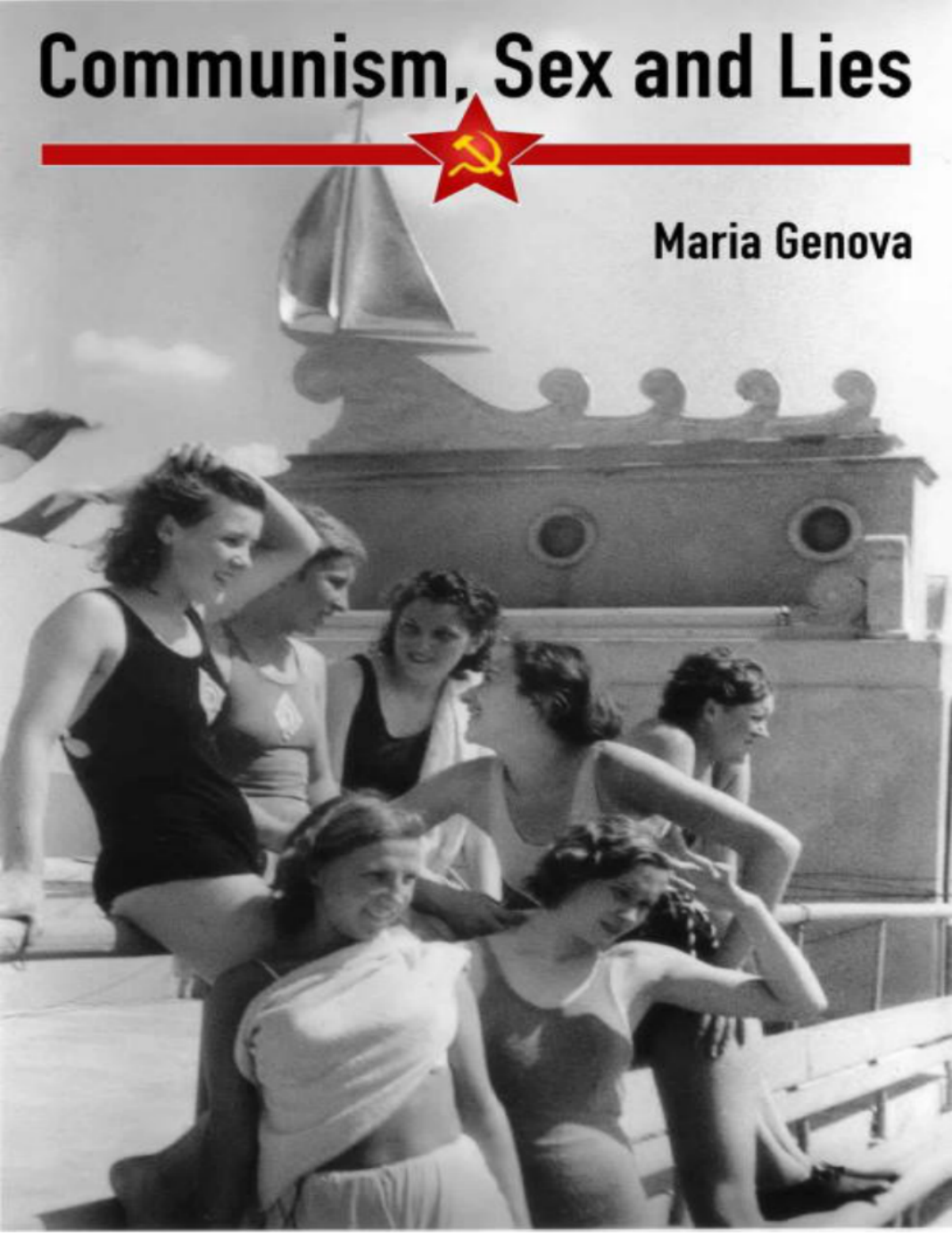
Communism, Sex and Lies



Maria Genova

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Annotation

Communism, Sex and Lies offers a sharp and humorous observation of life in a communist country. It is not as black and white as outsiders often think. Can you miss the freedom of speech when you don't exactly know what is is?

This is the coming-of-age story of a young woman who rebels against the established order. Her funny and absurd adventures take place in Bulgaria and Russia, against the backdrop of the wavering communist regime. Can you filter the truth from fake news when you are brainwashed?

Maria Genova was born in Bulgaria in 1973. She works as a journalist and writer. Her dream came true, but not in the country she had in mind. *Communism, Sex and Lies* was her prize-winning debut novel.

- Maria Genova
  - The unreal reality
  - The sexy enemy of the people
  - A packet of butter
  - The meaning of life
  - In the elite prison
  - Shooting with Kalashnikovs
  - Fireflies and discrimination
  - Travelling with a secret weapon
  - The magic of winter
  - Unexpected meeting
  - Russia
  - Gorbachev
  - Surprise attack
  - Lies
  - Fainted
  - Western tourists
  - In love with a corpse
  - From communism to capitalism
  - A glass tower of prejudices
  - Dog food and diaries
  - On top of the world
  - Note from the author
  - Acknowledgments
  - Copyright

Maria Genova
COMMUNISM SEX AND LIES

The unreal reality

I looked at my wedding ring somewhat incredulous. The three diamonds sparkled beautifully in the bright sun. Married in Las Vegas, in the lair of capitalism. If anyone had predicted this a few years before, I would have said they were crazy. Back then we couldn't even leave our country and all Bulgarian media portrayed The West as hell on earth. That seemed so long ago now. Perhaps because communism was such a surreal experience. We were taught pseudo history and were silenced from a very early age. It was for that very reason that my generation did not believe that the ideals on which we were raised would so quickly land on the dumping ground of real history. We felt free and happy in our spacious cage, in a country where nothing was allowed and everything was tolerated. We enjoyed our carefree life without our own responsibilities, because communism was in control. We had plenty of time to party, to flirt or to stand in line to pick up the latest scarce product.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall my eyes were opened. Communism was suddenly an incomprehensible paradox. I had helped build a just society, one I tried to dismantle with just as much dedication a few years later. Despite everyone knowing there was no way back, many people started to feel nostalgia towards the good old days, where you didn't need to worry if you could put enough bread on the table or that you would lose your job. They didn't want communism to live on in the memories of generations as just a cold dictatorship, because underneath the cold surface hid much optimism, humour and good ideas.

I found nostalgia towards the past to be completely useless, because no one could bring it back to life. My youth became an unreachable island in time. Only in my thoughts could I still be that innocent girl that sang communist songs with such fervour. Only in my thoughts could I see myself as the sexy, rebellious teenager, who tried to win the hearts of young men. In reality, the girl has blossomed into a woman, a woman with a past. She could not forget that, because the Bulgarian communists were the most skilled designers of the soul.

While I admired my expensive diamond ring I wondered for a second whether the entire wedding in Las Vegas had actually taken place. The communists had made us believe in things that didn't exists and denied those that did. Was I so brainwashed that I also could not distinguish fairy tales from reality?

Memories swam like tiny lost fish towards the surface of my consciousness. As communist youth, we were probably the neatest

because we had to endure a weekly inspection at school. Every Monday the teachers would look at our nails and if they felt they were too long they would cut them short right there. A teacher disapproved of my hairdo, grabbed a large pair of scissors from her desk drawer and started cutting. I thought it pretty normal that my hair was cut in front of the class and I was not embarrassed. I was more worried about the result, but because there was no mirror I could not see. The only thing I heard during those endless minutes was the tsjik-tsjik sound. The blunt scissors caught in my thick hair a few times, but eventually all undesired hair fell on the floor.

During the break, all the other kids were remarkably quiet. No one dared to comment on my new hairdo. After a while the biggest bully came towards me. 'Mer, you have quite an original look', he said. 'Like a cabbage run over by a Trabant'.

'Why don't you go and say that to Comrade Dimitrova', I snapped. 'Then you might be given an even more original look. If you're too chicken, I can arrange it for you'. The bully backed off just as quickly as he had appeared before me.

When I got home my mother nearly had a heart attack. 'What happened to your hair?'.

'Comrade Dimitrova thought it was too long,' I replied. 'Has Comrade Dimitrova gone blind? Your hair was no longer than shoulder length!'

'She didn't think my hairdo was neat enough'.

My mother was outraged. She always thought she could cut my hair well and now her creation had been publicly disapproved of. Despite this, she did not go to complain, because you just didn't do that. You never argued with teachers, civil servants or party secretaries. The people did what the party leaders commanded and adhered to thousands of unwritten rules. No wonder that during my time communism had become so accepted: the older generation had been completely brainwashed and the new generation inherited a tightly controlled thought pattern.

The most important school rule was that you were not allowed to forget your silk communist scarf. All teachers were very strict about this: without the red scarf, you were not allowed in school. It did not matter how far away you lived from school, you had to go back home to get it. And if your parents were out to work then you had to phone them to get them to come as soon as possible.

We were not bothered with all the rules. It was all daily routine and only now and then did things go wrong. My grandmother has knitted a lovely white collar as replacement for the cotton collar of my uniform. I had to leave the school premised immediately, because such deviations were not tolerated in a country where all citizens were

to be alike.

Some teachers with dictatorial tendencies had the habit of pulling disobedient children through the classroom by their ears. One always threw pencils through the window if he became angry, another hit us around the ears with a ruler and threw chalk at us. The same teachers gave us lessons in ethics in order to become better citizens. We had to repeat in unison what we would do if we saw an old woman with a heavy shopping bag. 'Ask the woman if we can carry her shopping home for her', we repeated obediently. And if a mother with a child boarded a full bus? 'Stand up and ask if she wanted to sit down', was the answer.

I personally hated Comrade Popova the most, a teacher who wore a gold ring. If I wasn't paying attention she would tick it against my head. Sometime Comrade Popova thought that half the class was not behaving and sent us all to the corner. As there were not that many corners, we would form lines along the wall. We would stand with our backs to the class, look at each other and try not to laugh, because that would only make things worse. We didn't want any remarks about bad behaviour in our school reports.

To get revenge on such tyrants, we would 'disable' their chairs by unscrewing bolts and moving the seat a little. We would laugh out loud if such a smug tyrant thudded onto the floor. 'Who did this?' was of course the inevitable question. We never ratted each other out. The lessons in ethics seemed to have some value after all.

Most of us were happy in the artificially created vacuum of Bulgarian communism. We felt it obvious that this was the most just, solidary and fantastic society. Nearly everything was well organized and there were no serious threats from outside the borders. Even though America had nuclear weapons we were convinced we could defeat the enemy. After all, we had the most powerful ally in the world: mother Russia.

Because of the communist propaganda, we knew that our ideals were stronger than the empty materialism of the West. This why every year we exuberantly celebrated the day that the communists came to power. Thousands of us marched through the streets in rows, waving balloons and chanting patriotic slogans. The festive music swept us up. Just once did we hear sad sounds and everyone turned around surprised. We saw a few men carrying a black coffin, on which the word capitalism had been painted. That was the reason for the sombre music, western capitalism was being symbolically buried to make room for a shining communist future for all countries worldwide.

During the parade, there were a number of official union representatives from Western countries on the official tribune. To my great surprise, they did not wave to us. That they did not know how to

behave towards us did not represent a problem: the next day they were shown waving on the front page of the newspaper. A friend of my father's, who worked at the newspaper, told him that his superiors ordered him to Photoshop the foreigners waving their hands with a little bit of cut and paste work.

The communist party had created a super state that took care of use from the cradle to the grave. Free education, free healthcare, guaranteed employment, hardly any theft or breakins at all… On the three radio stations we received in Bulgaria, we heard almost on a daily basis how much better the life was in Eastern Europe compared to the West. Everywhere on the streets were signs with propaganda written on them and the portrait of our party leader Todor Zjivkov hung in every school and in all public places. The streets were named after heroes such as Marx and Lenin and we were proud of the achievements of the communist system. Those who could not thrive in such a society could only blame themselves. Such as the old man who usually begged on the steps of the church, probably because he would rather be drunk than sober. I often gave him some of my pocket money, but I never talked to him, because beggars were by definition scary in a country without any unemployed.

A job was created for everyone. The party was a master in creating unnecessary jobs. Not that anyone felt unnecessary, but in Bulgaria, as in other communist countries, the principle was upheld that of three labourers, one worked, the second supervised and the third caused problems. It was more rule than exception that people arranged all sorts of private issues during working hours. 'Work ennobles man' was one of the most well-known slogans. Even the school children had to experience this and that is why we were regularly sent to the farmers to help them with their harvest. We all received a personal invitation. On the front the words read 'voluntary work for the fatherland'. On the inside, it said: 'attendance compulsory on penalty of sanctions'. We were not sure what the sanctions were, but no one dared not turn up for the compulsory voluntary work.

Each year it was something different: plucking grapes, digging up potatoes, gathering peanuts…I had a particular dislike of the peanuts. My hands would turn pitch black and rough from rooting in the dirt, I got backache from bending down and when it rained, the field turned into a mud pool. The worst things were the high targets, which were practically impossible to achieve if you were doing this work for the first time. If you did not achieve the target you would receive a public reprimand from the comrade who supervised. To prevent this, we used to put a layer of dirt on the bottom of the bucket; that weighed much heavier than peanuts and the kilos quickly added up.

The harvest was an inexhaustible source of stories about how we would fill the bottom of the cherry crates with leaves, how we smeared toothpaste on the doorknobs of the comrades and the modern version of sending a telegram: setting a piece of paper alight between the toes of the biggest sleepyhead and wait until he received the message. The damage from this cruel game was limited: in the worst case, they would have some blisters and the sleepyhead would not be able to achieve their target.

'We stayed in the farmer's houses and some class mates were delegated to the man who runs the village shop', my friend Olga said. 'The boys came into his store, drank all his booze and pelted each other with the eggs they found there. Then they went to the village square and threw the remaining eggs at a communist monument.'

We laughed out loud. An adult would have landed in jail for many years for such an act, but they could not incarcerate drunk school kids. They were simply expelled from school. And shaven bald. That way everyone could see they were dangerous criminals.

Olga's parents were labourers, the class that was praised to the heavens. On television, we did not hear anything else other than that our labourers were doing so well. The best workers received medals with the inscription 'Hero of Labour' and the departments with the highest production rates won the coveted trophy. Their photos were hung next to the entrance to the factories.

The Bulgarian people passionately built on the communist ideal and did everything the Russian leaders expected from them, such as was expected from a good little satellite state. When the Russians revealed after Stalin's death that the Great Leader had in fact been a killing machine, we could hardly believe this. We tried to soothe the pain of this discovery with jokes. Otherwise we could not process that the building of communism was at the cost of so many innocent loves. There was a joke about Stalin, who was called by the secret police with the question if he had found his lost pipe.

'Yes, it was under the couch', said Stalin.

'That's impossible!' the policeman cried out. 'Three people have already confessed to stealing your pipe'.

The sexy enemy of the people

The family I grew up in was only half-communist. I did not want to know about my mother's bourgeois' upbringing. Of course, she had told us that her father had been a land owner and that the communists had taken everything away when they came to power after the Second World War. She vividly remembered how as a little girl she chased the uninvited guests from the grounds with a stick. They just laughed at her, pushed her to one side and plucked all the fruit from the vegetable garden 'in the name of the people'. It was a shame about the lovely home, the servants and the horse stables, but she had to share her wealth with the rest of the people.

My sister and I thought it was weird that my grandparents used to be so wealthy. Luckily, we had nothing to fear. Usually everyone from aristocratic or bourgeois origins were declared the 'enemy of the people', but our father was a party member with the best communist background one could wish for. That compensated the traces of 'blue blood' and we did not have to fear that we would be denied access to good jobs.

We lived in a house at the foot of a hill. On the top a giant granite statue of a Russian solder towered above us. Aljosha could be seen both during the day and at night time, lit up by strong spotlights, and could not be ignored. The granite soldier watched over us and was the symbol of mother Russia who protected us from the imperialist West. Everyone who arrived in Plovdiv could see the colossal statue looming.

Plovdiv, the second largest city in Bulgaria, was built on seven hills, but just this one had become the symbol of the city. The attractions on the other hills were in the eyes of outsiders less imposing: an old clock tower, a weather station, an open-air cinema and a 2nd Century Roman amphitheatre. The century old excavations proved that Plovdiv was one of the oldest European cities. Not that there was much to signify this, because most of the monumental buildings had been transformed into advertisements for the communist ideal. They were hung full with slogans and housed exhibitions of carefully selected events in history, which the communists did not have any qualms about. From the viewpoint of the hills, the city looked like a giant beehive. People would cross each other walking, cars, busses and taxis rushed in every direction, school kids with neat uniforms walked in straight lines, labourers went to the factories in the industrial zone. Somewhere in this giant beehive was the queen, the communist party, and the people tried to care for her and make her happy.

Most people instinctively knew who they could trust. I mostly used my pretty neighbour Olga as a sounding block. Olga was a few years older than me and she was my role model on how to handle men. She enjoyed life and did not want to settle down. Olga could permit herself this luxury, because she was very attractive, with pretty brown eyes, and long blond hair that reached to her waist. Even when she had to cut her hair because of the toppled paint pot, with her large breasts and skinny waist she still formed an object of desire for men.

Olga sold train tickets. At the central station in Plovdiv it was a mass of people coming and going. A train ticket did not cost much at all and it looked like for that reason everyone had taken to travelling. Olga was usually busy, but sometimes there were times when she did not have anything to do. This was when she would polish her long nails and if, at that moment, a customer would want to buy a ticket then he would have to wait until her nails had dried. During such a beauty break her eyes rested on someone who made her pulse go quicker.

'He sat on a bench across from my counter and each time I did not have a customer I would hold his gaze', Olga said. 'Then I placed the 'closed' sign on the counter and walked past him provocatively.'

Olga knew how to do a sexy walk: straight back, breasts stuck out and swaying the hips so that her bum would draw the attention of a blind man. 'Men look at us to see us, but we look at men to be seen,' was Olga's motto.

The attractive man looked at her in admiration and asked if he could buy her lunch.

'I suggested that instead of lunch, we could smoke a cigarette together in the toilets, because I did not want my new supervisor to see me smoking. That was, of course, a trap, because once we were in the toilets we made love, 'she told me without a hint of embarrassment.

This incident did not surprise me at all. Olga had a license for love at first sight and did not worry herself if it flourished the same day. Sex had become an outlet for her, because sex was the only thing the communists could not control. Only this way could her free spirit be expressed. Her life existed solely of commitments and paying attention to what she could and could not say, but in love she could be herself, she could turn it to her advantage, she could experience the strength of her own mind and the freedom of her fantasy.

The lucky man found her behind the counter quite often the coming weeks. They had been an item for quite a while, even though they did not know anything about each other. I couldn't imagine Olga enduring the stinking toilets for so long. The rows of people waiting at

her counter grew longer, but she did not need to worry about this. In a communist country, you don't get the sack easily. Olga shrugged her shoulders with the words: 'They pretend to pay me and I pretend to work.' The customers didn't dare to think about complaining that the counter was closed during opening hours.

'Aren't you curious if the man of your dreams is already married?' I asked her, after I had tried to understand my friend's relationship without much success.

'That's not going to help me, Mer.'

'Then you know if you have a future with him or not.'

'I don't want to know. I am enjoying the moment. Such an all-consuming passion is the best thing that can happen to you. Most women could only dream of this. Thank you for your concern, but I know what I'm doing.'

I was worried about Olga. She had had enough problems in the past since the day her uncle fled to America. He was one of the few Bulgarians who wanted to see the West with his own eyes. Once he had crossed the border such traitors could not even think of coming back to their father land. Their whole family was targets as 'enemy of the people', even though they had nothing to do with it. Olga's father was jailed and interrogated several times each year. The officers threatened him that they would open up a secret hatch under his feet so that he would disappear under the ground and never see his daughter again. He just had to give them some details about this brother's flight to the West, details that he did not know.

Olga was therefore an 'enemy of the people', even though she could not do anything about her uncle fleeing to the West. When she was still at school she knew this would impact greatly on her future career. Some teachers always gave her lower grades because she did not come from an impeccable communist family. Olga has resigned herself to this fact, because she knew the bad grades were not due to her intelligence level, but due to the bias of teachers who had read the information in her file. In the end. she was not allowed to go to university and she had to settle for a job as a clerk.

I hoped she would have better luck since then, but I feared the worst. I was almost sure that Olga's lover was married. He didn't wear a wedding ring, but there were so many men that did not wear a ring when looking for an adventure. If he was not married, then he would have invited her round to his place ages ago. Instead they had quickies in stinking toilets. Did Olga not realize this? Perhaps she did, but she cherished her illusions for as long as they lasted.

A packet of butter

‘May I have a packet of butter?’ I asked after waiting for a while at the counter of the grocery store.

The saleswoman pointed to the telephone. Of course, I had seen that she was on the ‘phone, but from what I heard it did not seem that important. She continued her telephone call without batting an eyelid and turned her back to me. The salespeople had become so powerful in Bulgaria because of the scarcity of products that they could afford to do anything.

To kill time, I studied the products on display, one by one. They all had boring packaging with a simple caption. Rows of green bottles with washing up liquid, white soap, boxes full of laundry detergent, milk in plastic bags (which I always found difficult to open). Not one thing on the half-empty shelves looked particularly attractive and yet all these products sold well. The secret of the planned economy of the communist party. The party that thought they could predict the needs of the consumer and in turn produced just as many products as they thought were necessary. Usually the prediction was on the low side and the products sold without any problems. Unlucky people who came too late had to do without or borrow from the neighbour.

I never managed to fathom the logic behind our planned economy. Why were staplers on sale everywhere, but not the staples? I stared for a while at the grey floor in the grocery store, at the beige walls, at the yellowed white ceiling with fluorescent lighting which only seemed to add to the cold atmosphere. I only knew of one store which looked even worse: the large children’s store in the city centre. The salespeople never smiled and they stood like soldiers to guard the toys. The little one were not allowed to touch anything. The grumpy salespeople only allowed the parents to hold the toys for a little while before buying them.

After I realized from the saleswoman’s voice that she still had no intention of hanging up the ‘phone, I tentatively asked again: ‘May I have a packet of butter?’.

The older, rather stout woman, had apparently had enough of my moaning. With a gracious turn, she put a sign saying ‘closed’ in front of me. I would not have sought such graciousness behind her blunt exterior. I felt completely powerless. I had been stupid. If only I had stared at the walls and floor longer, I would have been holding the packet of butter now.

I left the store with my head bowed and sauntered home. I felt terrible, even though I didn’t really know why. The rudeness of the saleswoman was after all not that uncommon. All the other

salespeople were also rude to their customers. They were not paid to be polite. Some of them explicitly tried their best to chase the customers away, because the less customers they had, the quieter their day. That way they could read a book and at the end of the month they received just as much money.

Being a salesperson was actually not a bad job, but I suspected this was not meant for me. My parents had raised the bar for my future much higher than that. They left it for me to decided what I wanted to become, but this meant hundreds of jobs could be discarded right away. In any case I was expected to make a career and find employment in which I could intellectually develop myself. To be honest at the time I did not understand why I could not be a saleswoman. That way I would have lots of time every day to telephone them and the other hours I could of course spend on reading books and other forms of intellectual development.

My mother nodded in understanding when I told her the story of the packet of butter.

'Mum, I will go back to the store in half an hour,' I promised. 'I hope the saleswoman will have finished here telephone call by then.'

'If she's still on the line, then wait for a while, because I don't have any butter left for dinner.'

Sometimes we would stand in the queue without knowing what they were selling. Of course, we could ask the people in front of us, but they often did not know either. There was even a joke about a grandfather who stood in a queue under the assumption they were selling pastry. After waiting for a while it's his turn. 'How many packets would you like?' the saleswoman asks. 'I'll have ten, because my wife has a large baking tin,' the old man says. He still does not realize that they were only selling sanitary towels.

In reality, the salesperson hardly ever asked you how many you wanted. I remember, after waiting for nearly an hour, asking for three packets of sanitary towels. The saleswoman looked at me like I had gone crazy.

'I only give one packet per person, because otherwise there will not be enough for everyone,' she barked at me.

'But there are three of us at home. My mother and my sister also need sanitary towels.'

'Then they will have to come back themselves,' the saleswoman replied dryly.

I gave up and walked home. Once there I quickly put on other clothes, changed my hairdo and ran back to the store. I was determined to get another packet of sanitary towels for my mother. She was at work and by the time she came home, everything would be sold out.

Luckily my parents were well-connected, which meant we rarely had to do without. In her spare time, my mother gave piano lessons and her pupils would bring edible gifts. Some of them were farmer's daughters and if their father had slaughtered a pig or chicken, our freezer was filled up. Networks of reciprocal services created a second economy in the country and my father had 'friends' all over the place who would save scarce good for him behind their counters. Of course, they wanted something in return, but that was never a problem. A gigantic circle of vague acquaintances ensured that you could always refer someone to the right person.

The scarcity of many products also had its positive side. Life was uncomplicated: no advertising trying to seduce you into buying unnecessary products, no cars with flat tyres and because there was never anything interesting on television, this left you lots of time to visit friends. If your television broke, even that was not much of a problem, because due to a lack of competition nearly everyone had the same television set and you could ask all your friend for advice and help.

Competition was a Western fabrication that only complicated life. We were not interested in comparing packets of laundry detergent, toilet paper, soap, oil, butter and milk. Most products only had one type and that was more than enough for us. I only had issues with the Bulgarian sanitary towels. That was so large that it reached from my belly button to the small of my back. This meant I could not wear trousers, because I did not want everyone to know when I had my period. The worst thing was that the towels moved so much when you walked that every now and then I had to check if I had not lost it along the way.

The problem with the system was that you never knew if a product was going to be scarce or not. For some items, such as good quality toilet paper, you expected this might be the case, but how much toilet paper could an average person stockpile in their Bulgarian home? The regular toilet paper could not be any stiffer. My grandfather wiped himself with a newspaper. He saved the old newspapers, squashed them into large balls and then carefully flattened them out. I also used these pre-treated newspapers at my grandfather's, even though I did not find it hygienic. I had to agree that the newspapers were not any stiffer than the regular toilet paper.

I preferred to vest my hope on my parents, who managed to get a supply of toilet paper every now and then through their connections. In the meantime, I tried to decipher the secret of the planned economy together with Olga. We done this by making up a game, in which we had to react quickly to the other person's thoughts.

Olga got to go first.

‘In our country, there is no official unemployment, but no one does any work.’

‘Even though the people do not do much work, we always have a record level of production.’

Olga: ‘Despite this record level of production there is nothing for sale in the shops.’

‘Even though there is nothing for sale, we can get anything we want.’

Olga: ‘Of course we can get anything we want, but we would rather steal it from the companies we work for.

‘People steal at work, because no one is every arrested.’

Olga: ‘No one is ever arrested, but because so many things are stolen many companies cannot continue work.’

‘That doesn’t matter, because after all there is no unemployment.’

We would burst out laughing. If two young girls could complete the wondrous circle of the communist economy, then it was a breeze for the party leaders.

The meaning of life

My first years at school were mainly spent fighting with boys. Later on, I realized this was not the only way to get them to do what I wanted. My new weapons were a deep cut décolleté and a seductive smile. I also paid a lot of attention to my hair and followed the latest hair fashion: a wild hairdo like Tina Turner which was a result of a lot of my father's shaving foam and backcombing. Such a hairdo was forbidden at school, but no one could stop me in my own free time.

My father was continually surprised by how quickly his shaving foam ran out, but I could not find any other alternative, because hair gel was not available. My biggest worry was that it would rain. Especially since that one time that I was completely soaked and my hair started to foam in the middle of the high street. Everyone stared at me in surprise, but most people had no idea what kind of chemical reaction was taking place in my hair.

A whole new world opened up for me from the moment I was admitted to the selection group of a well-known tennis team at the age of 14. I played throughout the entire country, drank cocktails in hotel bars and would flirt with players in other teams until late in the evening. The trainers had great difficulty waking me up in the mornings. They never understood why, because they always personally switched off the lights in my room.

I wanted to flirt, seduce and get experience making love. I had no problem sharing my body with handsome young men, but I wanted to save my virginity for someone special. I soon realized therefore what I wanted: to be an experienced virgin. Strangely enough, all the boys I shared my bed with agreed to this. It was wonderful to make out this way, because I could let myself go without having to worry about any unwanted pregnancies.

It seemed like I was using the tennis as a cover for my romantic adventures and to escape from my parents' control. Nothing was farther from the truth. I trained at least three times a day at a murderous pace. I enjoyed all those nice trips to unknown cities, but I was more interested in winning. It was just a nice coincidence that there was also time for flirting after each game.

That was also how it went with Ivan, one of the best tennis players of my generation. From the moment we first met I found him attractive, intriguing and a little bit dangerous. He looked smug and did not even try to hide the fact that he wanted to get me into bed as soon as possible. When he knocked on the door of my hotel room after a game, ten alarm bells went off in my head, but I could not resist his tender and assertive approach. As an experienced lover, he soon had

me undressed. Ivan then lifted me up and placed me naked in front of the mirror, following which he slid his hands along my body like a professional sculptor. I smiled at his reflection. It was both romantic and arousing at the same time how he admired my body.

Ivan seemed to be the full embodiment of my desires. His nimble fingers tenderly touched the contours of my breasts. His lips followed the path his fingers had mapped. 'I'm still a virgin and I would like to be one for a while longer,' I softly said.

'Don't worry, Mer. I won't go inside you if you don't want me to,' he assured me.

Yet he still tried to convince me to do so a while later and used every moment of bodily weakness. Only when we landed on the floor frolicking, did he realize that you could not simply penetrate an athletic and unwilling woman. We landed in an impasse, which was far from boring because of the still uncertain ending. His lips enclosed my fingers and he became tender again. Even though I was angry with him, he made me shiver with excitement again.

'Mer, I want to taste you,' he whispered in my ear. 'Millimetre for millimetre.'

'Are you sure? I'm over one meter and 70 centimetres tall and that could last until morning,' I teased him.

A while later I felt something come from afar like the thunderous roar of a heavy storm. My first orgasm. An almost simultaneous climax. The groan from Ivan still echoed in my ear when I showed him to the door. My gesture did not seem to register with him completely.

'I want you to leave now. I can't forgive you that you tried to force me, ' I clarified. 'I didn't feel safe in your hands and I don't like that'.

It surprised me that Ivan did not protest. He wished me goodnight and left the room. I felt relieved, because I knew this meant the end of our intimacy. I never went to bed with the same boy twice, because I did not want anyone to think I was their girlfriend. A steady relationship seemed a nightmare. It was stupid to settle for just one handsome boy. That is why I protected my independence like a weak candlelight against a strong wind. I thought it was strange that people entered into steady relationships at a young age then to separate because they were not mature enough. That would never happen to me, to squander a valuable relationship. I toyed with promising candidates until I was truly ready for more stability.

In the meantime, I rushed to find out if boys were special enough and instead of being sad that they were not, my hart looked forward to the next romantic adventure. I was not obsessed by the male gender, but with looking for the differences between them. From the

way they expressed their passion, to their reaction at my inevitable rejection. My courting was very much like my reading. First, I would look at the book cover and if I found that attractive I would begin to read. People are just like books: it's all about the inside, but everyone sees the outside first.

Sometime I would continue to read in the hope that the content would excite me after all. With some boys, I already knew that it was time to close the book on our relationship after just a few pages. This meant I read many boring texts, but I had no choice. If I stopped reading, then I would never get to see a masterpiece.

Since I was fourteen years old I was asking myself what the meaning of life was and to discover that I devoured philosophical books that I found in my parents' large bookcases. If I did not understand something I would ask my father. Dad was intelligent enough to explain it at my level of understanding. He called me 'ant', probably because I tried to gather all the information as carefully as I could or perhaps because in his eyes I was still his little girl.

Yet his little girl had matured both physically and mentally at an early age. She wrote in her diary without hesitation:

'*At the time, I read the word hedonist in a philosophical dictionary I knew it referred to me. My adventurism is sometimes dangerous, but I enjoy it. The adrenaline rushes through my veins when I get to test myself in risky situations. It feels special to be the eye of the tornado, to experience things that other people are afraid of. I have more dreams than words. That doesn't matter, because I do not want to dream. I want to live. On the presumption that they both exist, I love the Devil more than God. The Devil is more exciting. I am not afraid of his temptation. I have agreed with myself not to regret the mistakes I make. My existence is exciting because of this. And because of my search for true love. Perhaps that is too difficult to achieve, but I love fairy tales. Love is like a fata morgana, you can never be completely sure that it exists or that it suddenly disappears.*

The fata morgana's make my life more exciting than it is, although I sometimes hate my shallowness. You could say that an intelligent girl can't be superficial, but I am superficiality itself. I jump from boy to boy without getting to know them better. As if I only have a few months to live and am afraid to miss out on any interesting people. I have always been this agitated. No patience to stand still in one spot.

I am driven by my sexuality and ambitions and I don't even know which of the two is stronger. Perhaps my growing ambitions are connected to my growing sexuality, which has the aim of getting more men under my control. I am a control freak. If I don't have something under control, then I am overcome by a sense of self-pity. I even try to dose my life's adventures so that boring periods do not follow each other.

I often feel both powerful and powerless at the same time. My brains

are aware of everything that can be gotten through money, ambition, charm and intellect and that is such a massive amount that they sometimes become stressed with the amount of choice and they cannot choose. I don't even know what type of man I like. Perhaps older boys. The younger ones are so obsessed with my appearance, that I get the feeling that the rest is not important to them. Sometimes a decent looking painting in a beautiful frame is seen as something wonderful. The adornments distract from the essence. That is the problem with all young men: their inexperience makes them look no farther than the frame. Only mature men also value your personality and become interested in the artwork itself. Not that I consider myself a beautiful work of art, but I have come to realize that one way or the other I can manipulate the stronger sex. I don't just fancy men in general, only men who admire me. Perhaps I fall for their admiration more than for the men themselves'.

I never opened my diary to look back. I was too young to have meaningful thoughts about life and the meaning of life. I hoped to find these in the literature.

'Young people imagine that money is everything and when they become older, they know for sure,' I read in an Oscar Wilde book. Was life really about gaining more wealth and power?

After many years, I still had not found the right answer. Here in Las Vegas it all seemed plausible, in this glitter world of neon full of expensive obsessions and human weakness. Or was it about looking for beauty? Even that seemed plausible. The mega hotels had risen like a fata morgana out of the dry desert and radiated with their excessive architecture a beauty that I had not experienced so intensely anywhere in the world. Maybe it was simpler than that and the meaning of life was just to enjoy it to the full? This was the most satisfying answer for the 14-year-old girl. For a woman with a past behind her, that was the question.

In the elite prison

Enjoying life, money, power and fame. For years, I lived with the delusion that I could achieve this with an impressive tennis career. But this came to an abrupt end when I was admitted to one of the most renowned schools, the Grammar School for Foreign Languages. I could do nothing else but obey my parents and mentally prepare myself for a year at boarding school. My parents were convinced that a good education would benefit me more than a tennis career.

The girls boarding school was fiercely guarded by an old maid. I was certain she was a very frustrated woman, because her hysterical voice constantly echoed through the halls. If mother nature had made her a little bit more beautiful she probably wouldn't have been so miserable and vent her frustration on us. Since a facelift was out of the question, she devoted herself to her job as a guard. She would lock the central door early on in the evening. At 10.00 o'clock lights had to go out in all the rooms. If you dared read a book after that time you were punished by not being allowed to visit your parents for a few weekends.

I felt like I was confined to an elite prison. Protesting against the establishment was impossible, but I found it a challenge to secretly break the rules. If I had a date with a boy, I would leave via the balconies. That was not without risk, but staying in my boring room seems even more deadly to me.

Once you are imprisoned there is a natural desire to break free. The strict regime strengthened my aversion from everything that was forbidden and as such the boarding school became a crash course in adulthood.

It was a great feeling trying to avoid the guard, sometimes even more exciting than dating boys I barely knew. They usually asked me during lunch break if I wanted to meet up with them in the evening. That was the best time to ask something like that, because most of the lunch break was spent queueing up for a croissant or a warm cheese sandwich.

The shop in the school yard did good business, because hardly anyone brought their own lunch. Despite the limited choice, I did not mind eating the same thing nearly every day. I often drank 'boza' with my lunch, a beige coloured wholesome drink made from fermented wheat, barley and millet, and at the same time I would look to see which boys were trying to catch my eye. Sometime secret admirers would send their best friends to arrange a blind date. I always said yes, because there was nothing to do in the evenings anyway. The school was quite isolated and the city was difficult to reach.

During communism, all schools were strict. We wore dark blue uniforms and even the smallest deviation was punished. We were not allowed to wear red or brown shoes, distinctive jewellery was out of the question, make-up was forbidden and your hair had to be tied up in a bun or ponytail. Even though the temperature in the classroom sometimes rose above 35 degrees centigrade, the boys were not allowed to take off their blazers. Comrade Taneva decided a shirt was not neat enough. They would sweat profusely, but she was unrelenting: 'If the Director keeps his blazer on, you will also.'

At least we could not complain about the temperature in the winter, because in the big cities the schools were heated well. This was not always the case in the countryside. A friend told me that it was so cold that once they ripped up the wooden floor during their break and threw it all in the stove. The bonfire did not last long. The culprits were sent to the Director straight away and immediately had to look for another school.

The punishments at our elite school were not so severe, because most of us were sons and daughters of prominent party members, directors of state-owned companies or important civil servants. Despite this many teachers were constantly on the lookout for a scapegoat. I was often chastised for wearing earrings that were considered to be too long, but they were no longer than two centimetres. Luckily, I could keep the peace by taking them out. Milena, the girl I shared a desk with, had a real problem. She had natural highlights in her hair and many teachers complained about this. It cost her a lot of effort to convince them that she had been born with this hair, but the history teacher did not believe her. That meant war: Milena was constantly bullied by her.

One day my friend appeared with a boyish haircut.

'Did you surrender?' I asked with a touch more sarcasm than sympathy in my voice.

'You don't think I cut my hair because of the highlights?' she replied with a question in return. 'You'll always see them anyway.'

'Then what made you cut your hair so short?'

'Orders from the Director. Yesterday I let my hair loose when I was leaving the school yard. The Head saw that, ran after me, and told me that I had to cut my hair very short the same day. To make sure that I would do it he took away my report. The only way to get it back, was to follow his orders.

I stroked Milena over her boyish head, while she wept.

'Don't worry, hair grows back very quickly. Look at it in a positive way. Perhaps Comrade Taneva will be delighted with your new look and you won't have to study so hard for History.'

'Do you believe that yourself?' Milena asked.

I didn't believe it. Her highlights were still visible and Comrade Taneva would surely notice the war had not yet been won. Studying less for history did not actually free up more time, because we would get oral exams in at least three subjects on a daily basis and we never knew in advance which of us had to appear in front of the blackboard. If you hadn't studied enough just for one day, then that would have a great impact on your grade. Then you were more or less going to have a bad report and you would be denied entry to university. If you wanted to have a career then you had to ensure you only scored sixes, the highest possible grade in all Bulgarian schools.

Milena would always skip class if she had not studied enough. She usually done this through official channels, by producing a doctor's note that she had been ill. She could do this through good connections, but if this was not possible there were other tried and tested methods. Milena swore by drinking a lot of Schweppes in combination with two aspirins. That gave a chemical reaction which results in a fever. Before the effect wore off she would run to the infirmary to have her temperature taken. Proof delivered: you couldn't go to school with a fever.

Because I could not be bothered studying every day, I had also thought of something. When a teacher would forget the class book on his desk, I would quickly change a few grades. I was a good student and the forgeries all seemed plausible. Usually I changed fives into sixes. Satisfactory grades were not good enough, because then I would get a scolding from my parents. They thought I was better than that. And I was: I had become a master forger. Sometimes I would also forge my fellow student's grades, if they weren't brave enough themselves. I didn't only do this for charity, but also for self-protection. Imagine if someone was to change the grades with ugly handwriting or in an amateur way, then I would eventually get caught.

I was almost certain that I would get the highest grade for all my subjects. I didn't believe in God, but I was grateful that he had given me the gift of remembering things without any problem. This meant I did not need to study hard and it left me enough time to explore the peculiarities of the male species. During my first year at boarding school I did not come any farther than profound discussions in the dark, walking hand-in-hand and a single kiss goodbye. I was in fact quite a good girl, while everyone thought I was a femme fatale. I wasn't sure if I should be pleased with this reputation. The only benefit was that it attracted more boys, whom I rejected in return.

'Why do men fall for someone they hardly know?' I asked my sister.

'it's because they don't know you,' she replied. 'Men mostly think

with their bottom half, because they are pumped up with testosterone. The fall for your sensual confidence without realising you will hurt their ego.'

'But that's not my intention. I play this game for the fun and without bad intentions.'

'Mer, you don't have to defend yourself. Be grateful for everything you have.'

I was grateful for what I had and also a little bit for what I didn't have. The latter made life a bit more exciting. The nicest thing about all new relationships is the uncertainty what would happen next.

Shooting with Kalashnikovs

The flickering advertising sign brought me back to reality. Las Vegas, the best place for day dreams. A tribute to luxury, excess, excitement and romance. The only place in the world where project developers would buy hotels worth more than $ 100 million and then blow them up to create something more luxurious on the same site. Everything I saw seemed so surreal. From the waterfall in front of the casino that turned into a volcano, to the pirate ship that sank into an artificial pond along the main street. It seems more surreal than believing in the nice lies of communism.

Every day, in rain and wind, we would stand on the school yard jumping and waving. If you did not bend your knees far enough you had to report to the Head. No one was allowed to sabotage the divine morning gymnastic session. To finish off we sang communist songs, a choir of hundreds of young people, most of whom could not sing. The class that sang the loudest was always allowed by the Head to enter the school first.

The morning gymnastics were just as obligatory as school itself. If you arrived late, you got a mark for absence. After a few times this would result in a reprimand and if you played truant more often you were expelled from school. We even had a page for good behaviour in our report which was of great importance for our future career. Elite schools did not want any pupils whose grade had been demoted from ‘exemplary’ to ‘good’.

If you did something stupid, you were dragged on to the raised podium during the morning gymnastic session in front of the whole school. A comrade would then inform everyone what you had done. Even the best-behaved girls sometimes had the dubious honour of climbing this podium. For example, Petja had entered the school through a side entrance instead of the designated main entrance. This shorter route earned her a place on the podium of shame. She was extremely upset, because she was one of the most proper girls at school.

I hated morning gymnastics, but I liked the real gym lessons. Finally, I could take off that silly uniform. My body was nicely toned because until recently I had played tennis for three hours a day. Strong, agile and quick was an ideal basis for many sports. I was often asked to represent the school in a variety of competitions: from high jump to volleyball to short track and cross country.

Some boys could not stand being beaten by a girl. That made my victory all the sweeter. I had a whole collection of medals and trophies, which I usually saved for six months. After that they ended

up in the bin, because I would win new ones anyway. I was a born winner. I believed that it was a good thing to have setbacks every now and then so that I would value my victories all the more, but how did I achieve this? Everything was in my favour, at school, in sports and also in love. That terrified me. Surely it was not possible to be happy for your entire life? It has to go wrong sometime.

'Hart breakers pay the price later, ' my mother warned me at a young age. But I could not stop myself breaking the hearts of the young men who fell in love with me. My life was based on collecting exciting experiences, for those moments in which my heart would beat faster. Even when I was a child, I was not happy with just hearing if something was good or bad from my parents. I wanted to experience it myself, even if it was something as simple as tasting soap. My parents claimed it did not taste nice, but it smelled so good that I could hardly believe that it would not taste good either. Only when I spontaneously began to blow bubbles did I realize they were right. I rinsed my mouth out with water for half an hour. Yet I did not regret it. At least now I knew one hundred percent how soap tasted.

Worse than the mandatory morning gymnastics at school was the military training. All school children would practice using Kalashnikovs during special training camps, which we would use to protect the fatherland. Every now and then the school alarms would sound as a sign that an enemy attack was taking place and we all had to flee with as little panic as possible. We did not live in fear, but we did reckon that there would be war. America and Russia held each other hostage for years by continuing to stockpile nuclear weapons. We were certain that capitalism and communism were incompatible, but no one knew for sure if the enemy would impose their ideology with force. We practiced with gas masks, learned how to tend to the injured, marched and sang patriotic songs. Sometimes we would enter fully equipped bunkers, where you could find everything you needed to survive a while under the ground.

Russia was always a step ahead: they did not only build nuclear shelters, but whole cities which they then proceeded to destroy with their own nuclear bombs. This way the experts could decide on the thickness of the walls of important buildings and the best construction method for bridges and metro's if a nuclear war broke out. The communist block had detailed plans how to destroy all large cities in Western Germany with a nuclear attack and reduce them to ash. After that, the tank division would enter the contaminated area so that they could occupy Belgium and the Netherlands. These kinds of plans were 'top secret', but the threat was tangible and we were well-prepared for it.

Sometimes highly ranked party leaders would visit us and then

we had to ensure that the entire camp looked brand new. We swept the tiles on the sports yard and carefully removed every blade of grass. We were then ordered to move all the smelly bins. The question was where to? We moved them about six times over the entire yard, but the leadership did not deem any spot to be good enough. On the seventh attempt, we were allowed to leave them where they were. The place they had been standing before we started moving them.

After this failed mission, we made significant progress on the building by brushing new white paint over several weathered layers. We needed quite a few pots, but the results were spectacular at the end of the day. Of course, we knew that this was not the right way to go about it, but we were sure that the new layer of paint would stay intact long enough to pass inspection. I had my doubts about the durability of what we laughingly called the highlight of our hard labour: we were given green paint to cover up the bald spots on the field.

Despite the uselessness of these activities we never doubted the usefulness of the military camps. Karl Marx had said ‘promise a capitalist three percent profit and no crime will stop him.’ Perhaps not all Westerners were criminals, but their governments were. Amerika had preyed on our communist paradise for years. The CIA experimented with hypnosis, drugs and torture so they could brainwash prisoners into making false confessions. But they would not get us! We believed in our patriotic upbringing with heart and soul.

Once all the lights went out in the camp and the television in the communal space leaned forward threateningly. 'Run, the Americans are attacking us,’ a shocked student shouted out. ‘Stand still! The party will watch over us. Stand still!’ the comrade shouted at everyone. We stood motionless and did not know what to do. The party did seem to be protecting us, because there were no more tremors. The earthquake that we had mistook for an imperialist attack had last for only a short while.

I hated the shooting lessons. Not that I was a pacifist, but I hated it when my classmates would hit the bulls eye and I didn’t. Perhaps I preferred a pistol to the awkward rifle, although I did not know this for sure because I had never held a real pistol. By chance I was given the opportunity. Not during our military training, but during a holiday at our villa in a mountain village, where the majority of the suburban elite had a second home.

An exciting young man finally came to the village. Trajan was an artist and quickly made a few nice portraits of me. This was too much for my parents. They started following me and decided how long I could spend with him when I went to bring or pick up a music tape. That was a big mistake for their part, because since the biblical tale of

Adam and Eve and the apple every sane person knew that forbidden fruit was the sweetest. But perhaps my parents did not believe the story, or maybe they were atheists. Religion is opium for the people, the communists would advocate and that is exactly what my parents believed.

Once they started to see Trajan was forbidden fruit I was even prepared to do the impossible so that I could spend more time with him. Artists are often special people, because they think in colours and patterns instead of words. What I found special about Trajan was the amount of chest hair he had. Surely a close relative of the apes, my mother would have said. But I found this beastly trait extremely sexy. It stimulated all of my primitive instincts.

'If you can use me as a naked model?' Even though Trajan studied at the Academy of Arts, I had not expected this question. At least not so soon.

'If you want me to take my clothes off, then you'll have to do more than just ask,' I replied.

'I want to paint you naked before I try to win your heart. Just imagine if I'm lucky, then our emotional bond will influence the entire painting. I want to capture you on canvas pure, without any ulterior motives.'

The same afternoon Trajan showed me round his studio. His collection consisted of portraits of a few people I did not know, a number of naked studies and many landscapes. During painting lessons at school I found getting the right perspective the most difficult thing to achieve. In Trajan's landscapes the perspectives were so natural and striking that they seemed deeper and wider than the canvasses. I recognized the steep rock face that was conquered by tough mountaineers every weekend.

'If you pose patiently, I will give you the painting that appeals most to you.'

I still hesitated, because I thought it was rather exhibitionistic to pose naked.

'What will you do with the painting?'

'I will hang it in my room. I promise that I will never sell it or exhibit it.'

I let myself be persuaded and took my clothes off, while he got his easel and brushes. I had no rational explanation why I did this. Why did I have this urge to experience everything I had not yet experienced?

Trajan's voice interrupted my train of thought: 'I was hooked on your smile from the first moment I saw you, but your breasts are even nicer.'

'I don't think you can compare those two things,' I said somewhat

irritated. ‘And I want you to concentrate, because I don’t want to pose for too long.’

He stopped talking and set to work.

The result exceeded my greatest expectations. I thought I was prettier in the painting than in real life.

Trajan was also very happy with his work.

‘Thank you for posing,’ he said and suddenly grabbed hold of my face. The taste of his lips worked like an anaesthetic. Trajan lifted me up and placed me on the couch where I had been posing. He slowly started to lick my toes. ‘A foot fetishist’ flashed through my mind, but it felt like a deep delight. His lips came higher and the warmth quickly spread through my entire body. His method was pushy and subtle at the same time, just like a roller coaster that slowly crawls to the top before diving down below at great speed. The climax was hidden down below in the depths.

I suddenly panicked that I was losing my mind in a labyrinth of lust and cast him a despairing look.

‘Don’t talk,’ Trajan whispered as if he understood my silent message.

‘Mer, please, I know you want me. I will do anything to keep you here. I will fulfil all your wishes.’

‘All my wishes? Then I want my own painting, not another one.’

He frowned.

‘I would rather keep it myself, but I believe I had already said yes.’

For the next few minutes I let myself go and enjoyed the intense pleasure flowing through my body. His touch brought out the nicest and most primitive feelings in me. Perhaps I would have to pay an emotional toll later for my bodily pleasure, but at the moment I did not want to think about it.

‘What if your parents come to pick you up?’ Trajan suddenly asked.

‘Don’t worry, they won’t hurt you. I don’t think my parents would come into a stranger’s house to call out to their daughter. They don’t consider that polite. I think I will get into big trouble for coming home late, but it’s worth it. The worst thing that can happen is that we will not be allowed to see each other anymore. But my parents have been checking on me for a while and we have nowhere to turn. Something has to change. Sometimes you have to risk everything to get somewhere. Unfortunately, you can also lose, but these are the rules of the game.’

‘What’s the chance that this will be our last time together?’ Trajan asked.

‘I have no idea. That also depends on my parents’ mood.’

It felt like the last time. Trajan whispered sweet nothings in my ear. After his warm fluid spread out over my stomach, our bodies continued to shake for a while before they came to rest. Was forbidden fruit always so sweet? Would I ever see him again? I groaned in silence. My mouth still twitched from excitement. He stroked me softly and took in every detail of my body in deep concentration, as if he was scared I would disappear forever.

I stood up to get dressed. Even though I did not want to go home, I still hoped I could salvage the situation. I grabbed my shirt that he had thrown on top of a cupboard and saw the pistol.

'Ha, now you're mine,' I joked. I grabbed the pistol and pulled the trigger.

'Don't, it's real!' Trajan jumped up yelling.

My hands suddenly went weak. Trajan grabbed the pistol and looked at it.

'Luckily it was not loaded this time, but normally it has real bullets in it.'

'Sorry, I was being stupid. I thought it was a toy gun.'

'My uncle is a high-ranking officer in the communist party. That is why he is allowed to have a gun,' Trajan mumbled.

It was a weird way to say goodbye. On my way home I realized that I nearly had a death on my conscience. The next moment my parents declared Trajan dead. I was not allowed to see him again. Because I realized my parents were deadly serious I accepted this.

In the same week, not only was my young love for Trajan wiped away, but also the centuries old hills in front of our house in Plovdiv. Not the high one with the granite statue of Aljosha, but a smaller hill where all the neighbourhood children played. There was no statue on the small hill in front our house and that was a good argument to blow up our playground. We weren't sure exactly what they wanted to build there, but according to the rumours it would be one of the many cultural party buildings.

The police closed all the surrounding streets and told us to go away. A powerful explosion damaged the roofs and windows of most of the houses in the vicinity. I was surprised that I had not been injured, because it was raining stones where I was standing. From a distance, we saw a trailer from a truck fly into the air. It looked like a horrible action movie with a touch of science fiction.

My parents never received any compensation to repair the damages. Neither did any of the neighbours. No one dared to complain. They weren't sure exactly where to go and what the consequences would be if they did. The worse thing was that it was all for nothing. We were left with a damaged roof and broken windows, but the granite hill was mostly intact. Only my favourite rocks had

been blown away and with them a piece of my childhood memories.

Fireflies and discrimination

Meanwhile Olga lived on cloud nine, but she finally fell off it with a thud.

'He's married and she's pregnant,' she mumbled nearly inaudibly through a sea of tears.

I put a hand on her shoulder. 'Is that why he doesn't want to see you anymore?'

'Yes,' Olga nodded and almost choked on her tears.

This was a delicate situation. A philosophical chat would not help her now and I did not know how to comfort her.

'Love is a gamble,' I heard myself say. 'You lost this time, but next time you'll go home with the jackpot.'

Olga looked up: 'Do you make this rubbish up on the spot or did you read it somewhere?'

'I'm making it up on the spot because I don't know how to comfort you. Perhaps you need a break. An acquaintance of mine has a nice house on the Black Sea and has invited me to stay with him for some time. He's a pianist. I have no idea if he's musically gifted, but he is physically. He once confided in me that his penis is 26 centimetres long. Man are natural boasters when it comes to their best friend, but there has to be some truth to it. I think Vladimir is waiting for a beautiful young woman like yourself. He just doesn't know that you're coming, but I will let him know.'

'Wait, do you mean that I am just going to go to a complete stranger's house?' Olga asked, who has suddenly seemed to forget her heartbreak.

'You spent time with a complete stranger in the toilets, so in any case the location will be better.'

'But I've never met the guy!' Olga protested.

'26 cm sounds very interesting,' she added a little while later. Her eyes shone, but no longer from crying. She clearly saw room for a new adventure.

'How are you going to get us together?'

'I'll tell him I'm coming with a friend. When we go to buy tickets at the station I will suddenly become nauseous and I'll go home to rest for a few days. You will go ahead to meet him and wait for me there. Once you're in the train I'll phone Vladimir to let him know what's happened. '

Olga didn't have to think about this for much longer. After the disastrous ending to her relationship she was in the mood for some fun. She had come to the right conclusion herself: there's no point crying over spilled milk.

Vladimir was disappointed that I wasn't feeling well at the last minute.

'Better one female visitor than none at all,' I joked with a pretend weak voice. 'Just wait until you see Olga!'

Olga phoned a few days later.

'I'm not sure if you want to know, but 26 cm is better than sixteen,' she told me excitedly.

'I didn't want to know that,' I replied. 'The only thing I want to know is why you sleep with men so quickly. It doesn't show much self-respect. It's like you don't realise your own worth.'

'On the contrary, ' Olga retorted. 'Only women who know their worth, allow themselves such pleasures.'

Olga obviously did not believe in monogamy.

Our holiday home in the mountains was the perfect place to forget all problems and ethical dilemmas. My sister and I ran through the tall grass on the fields, plucked bright red poppies and purple irises and passed the time catching beetles with shiny wings. If we found hedgehogs, we would find them a meal of grasshoppers. I loved chasing the chickens on the street, until one time a brave rooster attacked me. That aggressive animals picked at me three times in a row and after that I was frightened of those unpredictable village animals. Especially the sheep. When I ran, the whole herd would gallop after me. The farmers yelled, like I was trying to take their herd away, while I was actually trying to make those stupid animals go away.

When we couldn't be bothered looking for insects, we usually played war: Russia against America. We didn't throw nuclear bombs, but apples, pears and plums. There were fruit trees in abundance in the village. They often grew next to the road or in fields that weren't owned by anyone. The communists had expropriated all the land from its owners, because no one was allowed to have more than his neighbour. Everyone was equal and everyone earned roughly the same wages, if you were a welder or a professor. Despite this my parents would never let me marry a welder. They didn't want some foul-mouthed labourer in the family, who would wolf whistle at every attractive girl.

My well-educated parents thought it unfair that a brain surgeon did not earn more than a hairdresser. This didn't worry me. I still hadn't decided if the inside or the outside of a head was more important. Olga was convinced that it was more beneficial to take care of the outside. And if both were equally important, then equal pay seemed fair. Besides, not many people complained about their wages, because everyone could make a decent living. That is why a profession was often seen as a status symbol instead of a source of income.

There were officially no social classes in Bulgaria, but villagers, low-skilled and Turkish people were not held in high regards. The gypsies were seen as the garbage of society. They stink, they lie and they steal.

The low-skilled were also discriminated against. Under communism everyone was able to study free-of-charge and if you did not profit from this then you were not smart. Prejudices are always black and white. If you did not continue your education, you were immediately labelled. I was discouraged from having low-skilled friends.

'Ignorance is not contagious!' I protested even though I knew there was no point in discussing this type of topic with my parents.

'It might not be contagious, but it is hereditary,' my parents said, who always stuck to their guns when it came to upbringing.

This didn't worry me, because I was not yet ready to settle down and raise a family. I liked playing with different types of boys and make a game out of trying to guess from which social class they came. The difference could usually be found in the use of swear words. The rough types had mastered the art of regular swearing without repeating themselves. Sometimes they sounded awful, but they compensated their foul-mouthed vocabulary with their well-trained bodies, aggressive courting techniques and beautiful guitar playing.

In the evening, we would often sing English songs on the village square. Western music was sold everywhere, even though we were not allowed to watch English-language television channels. We played Queen, sang Beatles songs and thought we were the happiest youth in the world. We walked hand-in-hand, listening to the crickets chirping and enjoying the beautiful views when we climbed the hills. It was an innocent type of romance: so pure and unspoiled as could only be possible in a village. The big city had different rules. Romance was much tougher there and usually happened in bars and disco's. We didn't need disco lights in the village: we would catch fireflies and stuck them to our foreheads with a little bit of spit. The fireflies would go on and off the whole night and when we were bored of them we would let them go.

Travelling with a secret weapon

The magical slot machines in Las Vegas had no time to be bored. A shower of falling coins created a unique sound. Thousands of hands pulled the handles of the slot machines in fluid movements in the choreography of this modern music video. I saw Las Vegas as a form of art, as an ode to the human search for happiness.

Through the flashes of my childhood memories Las Vegas could not be seen as an art form but hell on earth. Life in a capitalist country had to be awful. The labourers were exploited, the politicians fought and no one was sure they would still have a job the next month. The only achievement of the Americans had been the invention of the dollar. The exchange rate was not realistic in Bulgarian banks, but it was on the black market. On the streets, Western tourists would get as much as five times more Levs for their dollars. Of course, that was prohibited, but the traders had already bribed the police to look the other way.

It was forbidden for Bulgarian citizens to have dollars, except if they had earned them themselves when abroad. With a few dollars in your pocket you were considered rich and you could go to the special dollar shops where you never had to queue. However, it was extremely difficult to get a travel visa, because all citizens were classified as potential political refugees. My father was one of the 'lucky few' who had been allowed to travel for several years through many different countries. He thanked this on the happy combination of being a talented musician and a party member. If he had only been a party member, then it would probably not have been possible and if he had only been a talented musician then he would surely not have been allowed to travel abroad.

The company my father was part of primarily served the noble cause of spreading the rich Bulgarian culture abroad. The stage performances were spectacular with nice props, beautiful music and patriotic texts. Even dissidents who had had to abandon their fatherland couldn't prevent drying a nostalgic tear.

Dad was a loyal member of the communist party, but because of his many travels abroad he started to doubt the justification of the system.

'Communism is a nice idea, it all sounds honest and just, but some things just don't add up,' he said. 'The Western stores are full of products that we have never even heard of. Everything is nicely packaged to grab your attention and the customer is always right. When you enter a store, they even ask you if they can help you. Our salespeople don't even care if they perform good or bad. They get just

as much money and are never fired. The party believes you don't need any stimulation to do your job well, but unfortunately that's not the way people work.'

He had also noticed the great variety in cars. In our country, you could only choose a few types and you had to wait years for them. Even if you had the cash, then you still couldn't buy a car before it was your turn, according to a never-ending subscription list. People with the right connections would get their name bumped up the list, which meant that regular citizens never got a look in. You just moved increasingly farther away from your dream car.

The favourites were Soviets: Lada and Moskwitch. The Moskwitch rattled like an old tractor even when it was brand new, but could withstand rough treatment better than a Lada. With a few hundred repairs, it could last at least twenty years. Everywhere on the streets you could see people lying under their cars. Most Bulgarians repaired their own cars and would get helpful advice from passing motorists as most people drove the same car.

From the few types of car available, the East German Trabant was the least loved. It was not even that cheap, but it had a cheap image. Nearly everyone knew why Trabants had luxury rear window heating: so you didn't get cold hands when you had to push. There was also a joke about a man who wanted to buy a rear mirror. 'I would like a mirror for my Trabant,' he asked the salesperson. 'Okay, that's a fair trade,' the salesperson replied.

If you owned a car, you would do anything to get it fixed, because public transport, especially in the rush hour, could not handle the number of travellers. I went to school by buys every day and after my stop the bus was already full. People would still get in and would hold on tight, while the bus continued its journey with its doors open. The driver would shout out every now and then: 'Make room and move to the middle,' but that was practically impossible. Sometimes I would be standing on one leg and lose my balance. That was never a problem, because the crowd would catch me. Once I fell on the lap of a young man who had managed to get a seat.

'Oh, sorry,' I said startled and tried to stand up.

'Don't worry. You can stay seated,' he replied without batting an eyelid.

I tried to stand up again, but that was impossible, because someone else had already filled my spot. So, I just sat there on the lap of a complete stranger thinking how I would get myself out of this difficult situation.

'I'm feeling a bit foolish,' I told him, while I tried to dodge his gaze. 'I can't get up. It makes me look like your girlfriend. '

'If only that was true,' he replied. 'I've been looking for such a

girlfriend for quite some time.'

Now I dared to study him closer. He was attractive, too attractive for someone without a girlfriend. Perhaps had had just broken up with someone or he was too picky.

He looked at me knowingly.

'Okay, if you want, we could find out if I am the new girlfriend you're looking for,' I quietly told him, while I tried to stand up again. 'As long as you don't think I'm going to sit on your lap on our first date.'

It was less effort to get into a full bus than it was to get out of one. You had to start worming your way to the exit two stops in advance, otherwise you would miss your stop. I was lucky that my school was situated at the edge of town, because everyone got out here. With a little bit of luck, I could even grab a seat towards the end of my journey. The seats were upholstered in some kind of fake leather, that was ripped in different places. Sometimes I would play with the bulging filling, because there was little else to do on the bus. Sometimes I would try to read a book, but that was usually impossible. Then boys would start to chat with me or I would get pushed or someone who lost their balance would stand on my toes.

Luckily there were hardly any thieves during the communist period, because in those stuffed buses you couldn't feel if someone was putting their hands in your pocket or bag. I felt so many limbs around me that I couldn't tell if they were those of a thief.

Such stuffed buses seem an excellent location for unwanted attention, but this never actually happened to me. The social control was vast and potential assailants obviously knew that also. Of course, not everyone kept their hands to themselves: some men thought they would be safe because many women dared not open their mouth. They didn't try it with me: apparently, I looked too confident.

The boy on the bus appeared on our date with a bouquet of red roses. I inhaled their wonderful perfume and we entered the semi-dark cinema. It was a romantic film and towards the end I felt his hand slide over my thigh.

'What are you doing?' I snapped. 'Do you want me to leave?'

The severity of my threat had gotten through to him, because he immediately removed his hand. For him to later slide it over my knee. I secretly took my secret weapon out of my bag. I hesitated for a moment, but when he moved his hand towards my thigh, I hit out at the same moment there was shooting in the movie.

Krassimir yelled. Even though my timing had been perfect, most people turned to look at us.

'You pricked me with a pin,' he stuttered incredulously.

'It's a shame our acquaintance has come to an end,' I said and left

the cinema.

Krassimir was apparently still busy with his miniscule wound that he didn't even think of coming after me.

The magic of winter

In the winter, I would always go cross-country skiing with my parents. I loved it, but my heart would beat faster when I saw someone skiing. I wanted to do that also and I hoped that I wasn't too old to learn at 16. I rented a pair of skis, checked out the young gods who whizzed past and tried to copy them. Unfortunately, I spent more time on my backside than standing on the skis. When I had once again made a spectacular fall, a man came to me and asked if I needed any help.

He gave me private lessons and my skiing improved. Vassil took part in competition skiing and asked me to join his team. I couldn't believe it: I almost fell at every turn and he was asking me to take part in competitions!

'You're talented,' Vassil claimed.

'Yes, I can see that myself,' I groaned after I had once again crashed into the deep snow. 'If you want me to learn faster then you'll need to help me up. Otherwise I'll still be trying into the evening.'

After practicing for another skiing season I was ready: I never fell and I loved skiing so much that I didn't want to go to school in the winter. My parents tolerated me skipping class on the condition that I got the highest grade for each subject. One of our best family friends was a paediatrician and arranged fake prescriptions and evidence, which I showed my teachers. I had no idea what he had written, but I suspect I had the most diverse diseases. Luckily the teachers could not decipher the Latin names and that his handwriting was illegible.

We mainly trained in Pamporovo, a ski resort that attracted a lot of foreigners. We admired their colourful snowsuits and gloves. You could only buy these in Bulgaria in a few dollar stores, where they cost a fortune. I wasn't greedy, but it was wry when I saw a clumsy foreigner in a flashy snowsuit.

When I was seventeen my parents allowed me to travel alone to my niece in Sofia. I phoned enquiries to ask about the departure times of the trains. The woman mumbled a few times at a rapid pace and hung up. I had only managed to write down the first time, an express train at six thirty in the morning. I didn't like getting up early, but I had no choice. I was afraid that if I called back to enquire again she would shout at me.

My cousin Julia was a few years older than me, gorgeous and very shy. I left for Sofia with the aim of finding her a boyfriend, without asking myself where I would find one. I would have the most success in the disco of course, but it was not my style to pick up drunk men. In the moonlight, many men looked attractive, but you had

better not wake up next to them in the morning.

There was snow on the Vitosha mountains, that could be reached by public transport from Julia's apartment. I rented skis and went on a man hunt. Usually it was easy to find a date for someone, but this time it was more complicated. I had to arrange not one, but two dates, because my shy cousin would never go out without me and three's a crowd.

After a while I saw two boys that fitted my criteria. They couldn't ski very well. I followed them unobtrusively down the slope and when one of them fell I offered my help. I gave him some tips to improve his technique and he didn't want to let me go. An hour later I told his friend that I had a gorgeous, but very shy cousin and that I wanted to arrange a blind date for her. He was keen and we arranged to go on a double date the same evening. Of course, I first had to 'sell' the blind date to Julia.

'You did what?' my cousin's voice sounded both surprised and angry.

'It's just a date with no strings attached. If you don't like him, then you can walk away. And I'll come with you, I promise.'

Julia let it sink in. Her curiosity won and an hour later we went to get ready for the blind date. I could finally wear make-up without fear of my mother over-reacting. She felt that young girls should not wear make-up and that mother nature had given me enough good looks. I knew it was useless to argue with my mother. I always stopped at the first car to make myself up in front of the outside mirror, even if that mean bending my knees and putting my head on the car door. All my girlfriends used make-up and I didn't want to be left behind. When I came home I would remove all the make-up by the front door, but sometimes my mother would find traces of make-up. She would be angry, but powerless. Grounding me wouldn't make any difference. It's actually quite sad how little influence mothers have on their teenage daughters. They can prohibit everything, but they can't prevent it from happening.

My mother had no idea what an adventurous life I lead, that I drank alcohol from an early age and that even the combination of wine, rum and cognac didn't bother my strong stomach. Until she caught me one time in a smoky bar. Her reaction was a mix of surprise and anger, but then multiplied. She pulled me outside by me ear. I was lucky I didn't smoke, because my parents were avid anti-smokers. She believed it was hereditary, because no one in the family smoked. I didn't see the heredity link. But I didn't smoke, even though it was so trendy at school that you more or less had to smoke to belong to the in-crowd. Luckily the group of popular girls tolerated me as the only non-smoker, because I didn't find it attractive. I thought cigarettes

stank and I didn't want to get yellow teeth.

My father was still worried that I couldn't resist temptation and decided to do something about it. He offered me a cigarette. I looked at him surprised. Surely it was a joke?

'You must be curious what a cigarette tastes like?'

'I'm not sure I am. Some girls at school smoke, but I've never felt the urge to try one.'

'This is your chance and you don't even have to hide it from your parents,' my father smiled.

'But why are you doing this?' I protested.

'I know you'll light up a cigarette sooner or later. I'm giving you the chance to find out that it's not as nice as your friends claim.'

My lips gripped the cigarette like a vice and I took a draw. I nearly choked. My father beamed.

'Try it again. Perhaps it went wrong the first time.'

'No, I don't want to.'

'Come on. Then you'll know for sure.'

I took another draw. It felt like it was coming out of my nose. I didn't need any further proof. My father's unorthodox strategy had worked: I never touched another cigarette. Luckily the group of popular girls continued to tolerate me, despite my abstention.

Julia was enamoured with the boy I had arranged for her bind date. The next few days they were inseparable. I almost thought I had done a good job as a matchmaker, but it turned out differently. At the end of the week Julia got into a fight with him and made an impulsive decision. She was going to marry someone else. I was completely surprised, because she hadn't even told me that she had a boyfriend.

'Do you know him well enough?' I asked.

Julia nodded. 'We've been dating for about six months. He's really sweet and nearly as she as I am. A few days ago, he got down on his knees and proposed. I didn't give him an answer straight away, because I wanted to get to know your 'blind date' better. But now I know who my true love is.

The more Julia told me about her fiancé the more I was shocked. My cousin was marrying a farmer! Her parents were furious. In their minds, they could already see their pretty daughter walking among the chickens and picking beans. I felt sorry for them, because I also thought she was making a mistake. When I met him, I already knew my prejudices were right. He had a ridiculously old-fashioned haircut and he wore brown trousers and a checked shirt, that could have belonged to my grandfather. As if that wasn't enough, he was even more shy than Julia and only said a few words during the entire conversation.

Unexpected meeting

Marry a farmer? Never! I was looking for a knight in shining armour and not a knight on a tractor. Owning a villa in the mountains, where you made contact with the local farmers, was different from marrying into one. I would be deeply unhappy about being a peasant girl, because I was neither used to working the land nor listening to gossip.

Besides, the villagers had unusual customs. One tried to win my heart by bringing my parents a live chicken when they phoned to say they would not be on time for dinner.

I also had no idea what to do with the bird, which in the meantime my admirer had slaughtered on the street. I put the bird, feathers and all, in a pan of boiling water. It never occurred to me to pluck it, so I cooked the bird long enough until it no longer looked appetizing. I can't remember what we ate for dinner that night, but it wasn't chicken.

The train rushed past many small villages. I looked at the hardworking people who were working the fields in the bright sun. As an outsider, I found the farmers to be friendly, but I hoped never to make their acquaintance as an insider. I tried to forget Julia's words by looking for an empty coupé, where I could close the curtains and read without interruption. After looking in several coupés I found one where the curtains were still in one piece. I was only bothered by the music that I couldn't switch off and by the roasting central heating. But if I was reading a good book I wouldn't hear the music and after stripping a little bit the heat wouldn't bother me either. I opened the window and enjoyed the fresh air that blew in.

We always copied things from Russia, but our trains were the big exception. Here they had coupé guards who guarded the window keys. I had to laugh at the story of the English man who had asked the guard to open the window a little bit. He was so happy to have found a way to get fresh air that, with a typical Western naivety, he asked if she could open another window. She had gone back to her seat and had no intention of standing up again. When he asked again, she did stand up. She walked to the window that she had just opened, closed it, locked it and sat down again.

No one dared protesting to civil servants, because that didn't make any difference. We could only secretly hope for a more democratic system. When the communist express train suddenly slowed down, people wondered why. Had Western spies tried to derail the train or had domestic traitors loosened a few bolts? We already knew that Stalin had gone down the wrong track with his inhuman

bloody cleansing and that Lenin had literally had his enemies taken down, but we believed we would come back on the right track.

My train of thought was interrupted when my coupé door opened.

'Hello, Mer. Nice to see you again.'

'Ivan? How is the tennis?'

'I quit. A bad injury can change your whole life.'

I felt truly sorry for Ivan, even though he wasn't worth it. I remember clearly the day he tried to take my virginity against my will. I was 17 years old now and less naïve, even though my parents probably thought otherwise.

Since Ivan didn't know how else to entertain me during the train journey, he started to whisper anti-communist jokes. That was one of my generation's favourite pastime. Humour was a subtle way of hiding our fear and as a vent for all our other emotions. The anti-communist jokes took us to a mental state that was physically forbidden. We had doubted the all-knowing party for ages, but not yet the ideals of communism.

Looking back, it seems surreal that a whole country could be so gullible. Actually, more than one country, because the situation in Bulgaria was not much different in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland and many other countries. When the truth slowly began to get through to us, we were not quite brave enough to act. The line between words and action was thin. You could go to jail for both. No one knew how many secret agents in plain clothes were still walking the streets. We didn't feel spied on as such, but after Stalin's death the Russian secret police counted seven million employees, and since everything in Bulgaria was modelled on Russia, we could not afford to think we were safe.

We didn't feel like we lived in a police state, but some people were arrested for innocent jokes. Like Olga's brother. He worked as a printer and when his girlfriend came around during a break, he dipped his fingers in the ink and made two handprints on her white shirt. They were ratted out straight away and locked up in a police cell for immoral behaviour. After questioning his girlfriend was allowed to go home, because she had in fact done nothing wrong. But she first had to wait for her mother to bring her a clean t-shirt, because walking the streets with such a provocative print was against the communist moral.

Olga's brother quickly made up a better version of the story why he had landed in a police cell. 'I said that party leader Zjivkov was an idiot and I was immediately taken in. For revealing a state secret.'

Despite these incidents, my generation were lucky they weren't raised in the first years of communism, when the party reigned with an iron fist and arrested all dissenters. They never said what happened

with the dissidents in the re-education camps, but when some of them returned, they had gone mad. Like one man who had once travelled in the West and spoke various foreign languages fluently. Before he was one of the most intelligent men who lived in the small coastal village where a friend of mine lived, but since his forced incarceration he wandered the streets with a bottle of alcohol in his hands and babbling incoherent words. No one knew for sure if he had lost his ability to speak or if he only pretended to, to distance himself from society and the people in power.

We couldn't imagine that not that long ago just drawing a dollar sing would be enough reason to send someone to a re-education camp, where forced labour and brainwashing would force him to see reason. In the first years of communism even the smallest things were seen as an offence. We only talked about these things in the form of jokes. A dissident was given a ten-year jail sentence. 'What did you do?' his fellow inmates asked.

'Nothing,' he replied.

'That can't be right. They give you five years for doing nothing.'

The communists had even set up a curfew and if my mother was walking along the streets in a miniskirt, she would get black stamps on her knees. Women in miniskirts were an embarrassment to the socialist society where according to the teaching the morals were higher than in the West. The tight trousers that my father an all other men wore at that time were unceremoniously cut in the crotch. Often not even by police officers, but by controlling citizens who wore red bands on their arms as a distinguishing sign. You certainly headed home quickly with a slit in your crotch. The crotches were only cut if a ping pong ball couldn't slide down the trouser leg. Not all of the officers had ping pong balls. Most of them used their eyes to judge.

'We were discouraged form wearing black tights,' my mother said. 'The party thought they looked whorish. They were seen as coming from the West and everything that came from the West was by definition bad. Brown tights were allowed. Jazz music, however, wasn't, because that was seen as the devil's music. If you played it nonetheless then that was reason enough to send you to a re-education camp.'

'We imported only what we really needed and preferably nothing from capitalist countries,' my father added to her tales about this strange past. 'When the Americans set up an embargo because of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, we got around this by importing computer technology and machines through third world countries. The Americans weren't allowed to know this, so newly-imported machines were covered in huge stickers with 'high voltage' and 'beware, dangerous'. If an American delegation came to visit they

would quickly walk past the unrecognizable production tools.

Society had changed a generation later. We felt free and happy in our spacious cage. Everyone had a job, the schools and health care were free, most people earned enough to live a good life and to save for vacations. Pregnancy women were given one year paid maternity leave and two years unpaid. When they came back after three years, they were certain that their job had been kept open for them. The streets in the large cities were sprayed clean by tank-cars every night and swept clean during the day by the gypsies. All plantations were kept neat and tidy.

Russia

I could hardly believe it when my parents told me one nice, sunny day that we were travelling to the most powerful country in the world. Just me and my younger sister by two years, who had just turned 15! My father had studied in Moscow and we would stay with his best study friends. Mother Russia was waiting for us.

When we arrived at Sofia airport, we felt like we were in an exciting film. Our parents were not allowed to escort us any further than the departure hall. We wanted to take a picture, but an armed police officer rushed to us and snapped: 'No photo's'.

All airports were deemed military objects, where there was no place for family sentiments. It was also forbidden to take pictures of bridges and railways, as well as stations, transmission towers, harbours and factories. This was the same in Russia, so we had asked ourselves if there was anything we could take pictures of.

My sister and I passed the metal detectors and walked through to passport control.

'Look at me,' a grumpy man said and carefully compared the photograph to my face. He returned my passport without saying anything. Perhaps it was naïve, but I secretly hoped he would wish me a pleasant journey. I found it to be so terribly exciting to be travelling by airplane without my parents for the first time and to such an exciting destination. The era of 'glasnost' (openness) had already begun in Russia. You could only dream about that in Bulgaria, but in Russia people wore t-shirts with 'perestroika' (rebuilding) and 'sex' without being arrested.

The Red Square looked familiar to me, even though I had never seen it before. After all it had been the background for most of the news on Bulgarian television as well as the endless reruns of Russian films. We were amazed: we thought everything in Moscow was gigantic. The metro, the central department store, the hotels, the university buildings….we even found the traffic to be an attraction. The cars were crisscrossing each other. The drivers would change lanes every few minutes, loudly tooting their horns to avoid collisions and to vent their frustrations. We have never seen such chaos in Bulgaria. Perhaps we hadn't yet imported enough Russian cars.

Our hosts asked if we wanted to visit the mausoleum to see Lenin's embalmed body. I didn't want to leave this vibrant life to look at a dead person. Besides, we also had a mausoleum in Bulgaria where comrade Dimitrov, the first of the legion of heroic party leaders, had been put on display for eternity.

No, I didn't want to look at Lenin. I had already seen so many

photos of him and learned so many stories about him at school, that I felt like I knew him well enough. I wanted to see things that were truly new. Like the mass drunkenness of the Russians. On nearly every street corner you could see people unsteady on their feet. Gorbachev had not started an anti-alcohol campaign for nothing. The new leader knew how to tackle things, but this time he had misjudged, because vodka was the only comfort for the poor. I noticed straight away how much it meant to most people. We also knew how to drink in Bulgaria, but the way the Russians drunk vodka, was extreme. Young and old, low-skilled to career maker, they drunk more than was good for them. People who didn't know each other would scrounge change at the front of the liquor stores to buy a bottle of vodka which they would share together on the street.

Many Bulgarians had unique ways of obtaining alcohol. A friend of my parents was the manager in a liquor store and always opened the bottles by breaking the bottle necks. He would then pour the alcohol through a sieve. The first time we saw him do this we looked at him curiously until he explained: 'with every delivery I note how much percent so-called transport loss there is and then I send the broken bottle necks as evidence.'

Despite such inspiring examples, the Bulgarians were greatly behind the Russians when it came to drinking alcohol. Our Slavic brothers not only drank during the day, in the middle of the street, but even went to work drunk. Was this the country of communist ideals, of the impressive military parades, of the 3.7 million soldiers and 25.000 nuclear weapons? De people looked more depressed than proud. What also surprised me was that there was hardly any Western music for sale, while in Bulgaria you could buy a wide variety of records and music tapes.

Compared to the good life in Bulgaria, the economic situation in Russia was distressing. Perhaps that was why they drunk so much. I gasped at how they put all their food on the table and tried to share it as fairly as possible. My parents never needed to count the potatoes and we could always afford enough meat. That wasn't even at the expense of alcohol, because there was always a bottle of red wine on the dinner table.

Only the caviar was extremely cheap in Russia. The Kremlin had a state monopoly on the sturgeon fisheries and the Soviet Union accounted for ninety percent of the world production of caviar. The government boasted this was the only country where the labourers could also enjoy the 'black gold'. During the break at the Bolshoi theatre I ordered some crackers with caviar, licked the shiny grains off and threw the crackers away. I also did the same after the show and the memory of the melting caviar in my mouth stayed with me longer

than the art of the prima ballerina's.

No one could have predicted that the caviar production would be in the hands of poachers years later and that there would even be an international embargo on the import of Russian caviar.

During my stay in Russia there was caviar in abundance, but something simple like sugar was scarce.

'It's all Gorbachev's fault,' our hosts complained. 'He reduced the number of liquor stores and cut back on the opening times. No one can be bothered standing in long queues, not even for vodka. So people start to brew their own and all the sugar vanishes out of the stores.'

The people who did queue for vodka tried to keep their spirits up by telling anti-Gorbachev jokes. For example, the salesperson who has been ordered by Gorbachev to close his store. He walks outside and tell the long queue of people waiting: 'I'm going to kill that idiot in the Kremlin.' He comes back sad a few hours later. 'What did you do?' the people asked. 'Nothing,' he sighs. 'If only you knew how long the queue for the Kremlin was.'

Gorbachev's new rules reached very far, so I completely understood my hosts' complaints. If you were caught brewing illegal liquor twice in the same year, then you could get two years' hard labour. I doubted such strict measures helped by something so deeply enrooted in the Russian people. Even teenagers drank litres of vodka. I discovered this when I arrived by train in bustling Leningrad. The boys I met first had bought me a glass of vodka the very same day. I already had some experience with whisky and cognac, but the Russian vodka hit me with the first sip. The boys couldn't bear me nipping.

'That's a waste of vodka,' Mischa said, the prettiest of them all. 'You're supposed to drink vodka in one go. Look.'

Mischa drunk a second glass in one go after he had toasted with his friends. I wasn't sure I could do the same. I still felt the first sip burning in my stomach, never mind a whole glad. Mischa saw me hesitate.

'Come on, little girl, have some respect for Russian traditions. You're our guest and you should respect your hosts. Cheers, here's to good health.'

To good health. I hoped it would be okay. I raised my glass and drank it in one go. I felt my stomach burn and spontaneously got tears in my eyes.

'How much alcohol is in this?' I asked with a voice I didn't recognize.

'A lot. That way you know it's good vodka.'

'It feels more like methylated spirits. I feel everything burning inside.'

‘Ach, you get used to that. That happened to me the first time also,’ Mischa reassured me.

‘How long will it last? Give me a match and you’ll see me spit fire.’

Mischa laughed: ‘Calm down, there’s nothing wrong with your body.’

He was right, there was nothing wrong with my body, because the stuff immediately went to my head. I really had to concentrate to focus on the Russians. It looked like they had multiplied. After reaching the low of my alcohol career, I walked with my hips swinging in a zigzag line to the guest home.

The boys turned out to be excellent hosts over the next few days. They were all sweet, caring and considerate. From day one I had fallen for Mischa. Not because he has initiated me in the secrets of Russian vodka. On the contrary, I still blamed him. But Mischa had irresistibly gorgeous features, beautiful blond hair and deep blue eyes. The other boys acknowledged their disadvantage, but tried everything to make me change my mind. They arrived every day with gifts, souvenirs and bottles of vodka. I drank obediently, even though it was a strange experience. I still had the feeling an aggressive chemical cleaner was dissolving my insides.

The Russians assured me this would pass, but I didn’t get used to it that quickly. I could clearly see I was years behind. Yet I continued to drink vodka, because Russia was lovely and after every sip it became even lovelier. It slowly occurred to me why Russians drank so much. The most perfect communist society could be bought for a bottle of vodka.

In Leningrad it was the period of the northern lights. The fabled ‘white nights’ in June gave the heavens not a white, but a mysterious pearl-grey colour. I secretly wished that I lived in this city and that my parents had warned me: ‘ Make sure you’re home before dark,’ because it never got dark here. The northern lights meant it was still light in the evenings until late and even at midnight it was not completely dark. Luckily my friends’ parents were not that strict and my sister and I were allowed to stay out much longer than normal.

Our most memorable day in Leningrad was a day trip to the beach. Finland was on the other side of the bay. The West was so close and so far away at the same time. We wanted to see this glamorous world with our own eyes, but the borders were shut tight. Luckily, we were still allowed to travel to other communist countries. Otherwise I would never had known what it was like to tear through the streets in a Russian ambulance.

We had only been on the beach for fifteen minutes when my sister cut her foot on a piece of glass. The situation got worse by the

minute. The white towel I had wrapped around her foot, soon turned red. We had to cross a large park to get to the road. My sister could hardly walk and the Russian boys carried her the whole time.

We finally reached a telephone cell and called an ambulance. It came quickly and we were all allowed to come along, if we got in quickly. The ambulance drove away immediately with the siren on. The stretcher had not been fastened and swished dangerously to and fro. All kinds of tools for car repairs rolled over the floor and we had to lift our feet to avoid injury ourselves.

Only my sister was allowed into the hospital. Rules are rules. I stood outside waiting in exasperation while she was being operated. The nerves coursed through my throat and I felt very guilty that I had arranged a day at the beach with two of our admirers. My parents had sent us to Russia to learn some culture and history and my stupid flirting had landed my younger sister in the hospital. I hoped it was not as bad as it looked.

The hours of uncertainty outside the building seems like days. What would I tell our parents? They were thousands of kilometres away and the truth wouldn't help: they would only worry without being able to do anything. They might even think they were bad parents for sending their teenage daughters abroad on their own.

I didn't mind telling my parents what had happened, but I didn't want them to feel guilty. My sister and I were thrilled that they had so much faith in us and that they gave us the chance to be independent. That is what every parent hopes to achieve: that their children stand on their own two feet. This was not the case of my sister for the time being, because her foot had been cut open. I could walk, but I wasn't sure which way to go. I walked in circles on the square in front of the hospital, like I was caged in an asylum.

Luckily it was not for much longer. The surgeons had done a good job and my sister was allowed home the same day. A few days later she was as fit as a fiddle again.

When we returned to Bulgaria we told everyone the uncensored version, except to our parents, who were only told a vague tale about a cut. Besides all the good memories of Russia we had also brought home some t-shirts with 'glasnost' and 'perestroika'. Our friends were all jealous, because you couldn't get these modern items in our country.

Gorbachev

When Gorbachev came to power many young people in Bulgaria were relieved. Not because of his views, but because of his age. Because he still looked quite young and energetic, compared to his predecessors, this meant we would probably not have to mourn a dead Russian for days on end for the foreseeable future. The Soviet Union had lost three leaders in short succession and three state funerals in twenty-eight months was more than we could bear.

It started with Brezhnev with his unmistakable mafia ways. He had put friends on all posts up and down the ladder and under his inspiring leadership Russia had become a swamp of corruption. But we had to ignore this and act like we had suffered a personal loss. But with twenty-six hours' delay, because he had been dead for more than a day when it was officially announced on television. The party leadership had needed that time to arrange his replacement behind the scenes.

'I don't think that's an easy job seeing as the new secretary-general has to clean up Brezhnev's mess,' my father said. Of course, he couldn't say that outside the safe walls of our home. Everyone in our classless society accepted that the higher communist faction had access to items which were unattainable for the masses. Luxury goods, advanced medical treatments, fantastic holiday resorts, better cars and larger houses, which has been previously appropriated from so-called rich owners. This system, according to the Russian model, had been established in all communist countries, but in Russia it had been expanded with special department stores which were only accessible to privileged party members and holiday homes according to the rank of their owners. All Russian leaders had these huge country houses, tucked away out of sight by high fences and patrolling cars. The masses didn't even get a chance to stare at this luxury from a distance, because the senior party members wanted to maintain the illusion of a classless society.

The party members and their families had a good life, but even they had to watch their backs in a country where favouritism and betrayal seamlessly flowed into each other. Gorbachev's mother hid icons behind portraits of Lenin and Stalin so she didn't get into trouble with the godless leaders.

The new party leader Andropov wanted to bring back discipline and patriotism to the people after Brezhnev's death. Post offices stocked forms you could use to snitch on your fellow citizens who had an income but no job. People were no longer allowed to leave work early to go shopping. The police patrolled different stores, especially

those that sold alcohol.

Andropov was a secret agent through and through. He was ex-chief of the KGB and you could tell from his working methods. There was even a joke circulating that he owed his election to his gun. He walked to the room where the senior party members were discussing the successor and shouted: 'Hands up!'. When they did that, he asked them to lower one hand and had his assistant note: Andropov was chosen unanimously.

We didn't expect his KGB methods to make much difference, because the situation in our country was not the same. If you didn't go shopping during working hours, then many products would be sold out by the end of the day and people already snitched on people they didn't like anyway.

Andropov didn't have much time to check if his snitch system worked. At his election, it seemed he was already gravely ill. Of course, this was not communicated and when he was at death's door nearly one year later the media only reported that the general secretary had a cold. It was already clear to us what this meant, because usually the Russian party leader's cold would not have made front page news.

Tsjernenko succeeded Andropov and drew his last breath thirteen months later. The Bulgarian people were ready to join in with another mourning circus. When Gorbachev came to power in 1985 we had some hope, because he was only 54 years old and looked healthy and energetic.

The new party leader slowly opened the channels to criticism, but only a few dared to sail through them after having lived in an unquestioning society for years.

The unexpected introduction of glasnost was experienced like a roller coaster in Bulgaria: we didn't know which way we would be thrown with this new openness. Gorbachev himself seemed uncertain. His speeches were full of euphemisms and double meanings. We felt that he was trying to reckon with the past, but didn't quite have the courage. Gorbachev didn't criticize Lenin's acts of terror or the violent appropriation of farming land. He blamed Stalin for all deviations of party principles. His desire for reformation went hand-in-hand with unambiguous remarks: 'We are on our way to a new world, the world of communism. We will never deviate from this path.'

This was a sign that we had to be careful with interpreting the new openness. Everyone assumed that the communist system would last for centuries, but there was little left of the enthusiasm that the first generation had shown when building the most perfect society. We didn't know what to believe, but we knew it was better not to believe what the papers printed or what we saw on television. There was

AIDS in the West, airplanes fell out of the skies, there were storms and floods, the economy wasn't doing well…this didn't happen in our country. Sporadic incidents were quoted as small news items on the back pages. In 1986 the communist party even managed to cover up the gigantic nuclear disaster in Chernobyl for days on end. An inquiry showed that the reactor had displayed severe problems back in 1979. Seven years later a steam explosion blew away the 1 million kilo lid from the reactor. A radioactive cloud spread over Europe, but the Russians continued to deny that a major disaster had taken place.

The radiation was that bad that we admired mutated crops in Bulgaria, while the media continued to claim that there was nothing wrong. At school, we would regularly watch films about nuclear bombs exploding and read about the dangers of radiation, but following the disaster in Chernobyl we were told that a raised radiation level in the atmosphere was actually good for us. 'It will make boys grow taller,' the comrades said. They didn't add that it could give you cancer, never mind it being the largest nuclear disaster in human history. Almost 9.000 tons of radioactive material had been released, ninety times more than the atom bomb that exploded in Hiroshima.

The party tried its best to serve us ready-made interpretations of reality through guidelines, propaganda and even art. All paintings and statues had to be realistic. Abstract works of art were seen as an attempt to overthrow the communist rule. We were raised with absolute truths and we truly believed in some of the lies because they were more plausible than the truth. The reality we lived in, with all its secret rules and codes, was too complicated to comprehend. When senior party members went somewhere, trees without roots, which were cut down in other unimportant places, were planted along their routes. Our party leader wanted to be immortalized with a monument in his birth place before his death. Foreigners didn't understand: they put down flowers for him, because they though he was a fallen hero. The police kept on removing the flowers. In the end two soldiers were stationed to prevent these 'flower' incidents.

Gorbachev tried to sort out the privileges and misuse of power by the party officials: thousands of bureaucrats were sent home or disappeared in prisons for corruption. The West placed 'Gorby' on a pedestal and according to American polls he was more popular than the President of the United States. We wondered if Gorbachev laughed at the jokes that were told at his expense. For example that he was not aware that he has a red coloured birthmark on his forehead, before he saw a picture of himself in a Western paper. The Russian media had always Photoshopped his birthmark.

The photo editors could not grow more hair on his head. This was

a shame of course, because hair was extremely important in communist society. Too much hair was not a good thing for any citizen and neither was too little. This was also the case for Gorbachev, who had been turned down in the past for the position of First Secretary to the Alliance of Young Communists. The reason: for a leader of young communists he had too little hair. For the leader of the Soviet Union it seemed he had just enough, even though many people didn't think he was representative. Some critics even claimed the birthmark on his forehead looked like the contours of the arch-rival America.

Although the Russian leader had no intention of bringing communism to an end, he had involuntarily become the initiator of a rotting process. With glasnost came the striptease of the system. It was carried out by a shy naïve prostitute that only dared to take off one or two items of clothing to start off with and then later show the naked truth.

With all the revelations of cruelty in the camps, the party lost her grip on the past. We wakened from the mass hypnosis. Not that Gorbachev had envisaged this. He hadn't established glasnost to give the people freedom of speech, but by creating more openness stimulating the economic development. In answer to questions where it was not time to denounce the present system he replied: 'Why should I? Socialism is my conviction and I will promote this for as long as I can talk and work.'

We hung on his every word and we concluded that he would never change his mind.

Surprise attack

Glasnost changed little to nothing at our school. We learned that the Soviet Union covered one-sixth of the earth and that no one dared to go against this powerful empire. We learned to be proud of all that was Russian, even the fact that Gorbachev had worked his way up from inhabitant of a farming village to the leader of a world power. This was the land of unlimited opportunities and not America.

The teachers always used a tried and tested method. Their questions steered us to the only right answer. No one tried to defend an original theory, since that was not appreciated. In fact: if your opinion deviated too much from the teacher's then you were downgraded. We therefore tried to predict what kind of answer a teacher wanted to hear to keep them happy.

The school system flowed seamlessly into the social life that was expected of us. In the communist society, self-initiative was not appreciated. Of course, we all had our own opinions, but we pretended we didn't. We could only be ourselves in our love lives. I only allowed myself to be guided by someone else once. As a result, I met my match. Dimitar was a real 'ladies man' and dumped girls with as much ease as I did with boys. I often saw him at school, walking arm-in-arm with the prettiest girls. Milena was his latest conquest and she was very proud of this fact, despite my vocal objections. When Dimitar dumped her after one month for someone else, she was inconsolable.

'Someone has to make him experience what it feels like to walk around with a broken heart,' I told her.

'If you're planning on trying that, watch out that you don't fall in love with him, because Dimitar is a real charmer,' Milena warned me. 'And how do you know he's attracted to you?'

'I don't. It's possible I'm not his type, but I don't think that most men are attracted to me by my appearance. Men are able to resist a beautiful woman, but never an intriguing one. This brings out their primeval hunting instinct. '

Milena listened attentively. Her lips betrayed the start of a smile.

I wasn't sure what would be the subtlest way to show Dimitar that I found him attractive. Olga wasn't known for her subtlety, but against better judgement I decided to ask for her advice.

'You show up a few times in his vicinity, you walk sexily, smile and pretend you're a friendly saleswoman,' Olga advised.

'A saleswoman? What am I supposed to sell him?'

'The illusion that he has just bumped into the most perfect woman,' Olga replied self-assured. 'If you can do that convincingly,

any man will fall for it. It doesn't have to be true, because most men turn blind once they get led by their emotions. Don't think about what you are selling, but what the men want to buy. The sooner you figure that out, the sooner they give in. One man might want a sweet woman, another an ambitious and intelligent chick and the third a sex kitten. As you as you think you know what their dream woman is, then they are willing to do anything to get you. I don't know Dimitar, but if he is truly a lady killer, then he shouldn't be that difficult to conquer. Flirting is a promise of intimacy. The art is to make him wonder if you'll fulfil the promise right to the end. That makes you intriguing and attractive. If you show you are interested straight away, then the magic of the flirting will disappear,'

Getting Dimitar hooked, turned out to be easier than I had thought. Not long after our arranged acquaintance he suggested to go on a date at the weekend.

'Fine, but I want to warn you that I play hard to get,' I smiled with a smug expression. 'Besides, playboys are not my favourite type.'

He seemed surprised by this sarcastic remark. 'Do you really think I am the playboy everyone makes me to be?'

'Honestly, yes.'

'And who do you want me to be? Let me guess: you're looking for a knight in shining armour?'

'I'm not going to try to change you. There are more boys waiting in line.'

I suddenly realized how coarse my words sounded, but Dimitar didn't seem offended.

'Okay, unbeliever, I will show you my true nature.'

'Great, but I'm not available this weekend, because I am going with my parents to our villa in the mountains.'

'Then we'll meet there. My best friend has a hut there, somewhere high in the village.'

We agreed to meet on the village square at 11.00 the next morning. At 11.30 I felt I had kept him waiting long enough. I thought Dimitar would be angry, but he seemed to admire me.

'This is the first time that I have waited so long for someone. Normally I would have been long gone by now, but for some reason I didn't mind waiting for you.'

'That's sweet,' I said, while I thought: 'Great, 1-0 in my favour.'

After a walk in the mountains I was a little unsure about my victory. I found Dimitar more attractive than I had thought. He wasn't an arrogant playboy. He just couldn't resist all those girls who threw themselves in his lap.

'I jump from girl to girl in the hope that someday I will meet my true love,' Dimitar said apologetically.

‘And you never consider all those broken hearts you leave behind you?’

‘Oh, stop reprimanding me. One of my friends told me that you have the exact same reputation.’

‘When I turn someone down, I at least try to be as subtle as possible. The same can’t be said about you.’

‘Do you think I’m playing a game and trying to get as many girls as possible into bed only for me to dump them afterwards? I could be very happy with just one girl, only I haven’t met her yet. I was hoping that you would be that girl, but it seems you’re playing with me.’

I stared at him dumbfounded. Men usually don’t have such a strong intuition, but Dimitar had apparently learned a lot about girls. I suddenly found him dangerously attractive, so innocent and tempting at the same time. His blue eyes and long eyelashes were the prettiest I had ever seen. It was the first time I had played with such an experienced ladies’ man and just the thought that he might not want to be captured by just one woman, made him irresistible. The woods were prettier than ever that day, as if they wanted to show me that this was the best place for romance. The sun lit up the green curls of the oak trees and the pointy branches of the pines. The shadows of the branches danced on the ground on the multiple melodies of the birds. This was the moment to convince Dimitar that I was not playing games, that my interest in him was real.

I bowed my head towards him. Our lips touched gently. I asked myself what I was doing, but he didn’t give me any time to think. Our kisses became more passionate and I lost track of where one kiss ended and the other started. Funnily enough my mind was still clear enough to realise the score was now 1-1. I let myself be guided by my heart, by someone who was collecting hearts.

Where every man would try his luck in a similar situation, Dimitar proposed to go back. ‘Let’s meet up in my hut tonight. I have a surprise for you.’

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. He just broke off our warming up and left me with my body tingling. Was he made of steel or was this part of the game? I appreciated the interruption, because now I could get my thoughts in order. When I went to his place in the evening, I was once again determined to win the game.

I had put on the perfect dress to conquer a man. It emphasized my female curves and the décolleté was just deep enough to be sexy without looking cheap. The rustic house in the mountains smelled of chocolate. It was as if my senses had started to fantasize on their own, but suddenly I really saw a pan of melting chocolate on the stove.

Dimitar followed my questioning stare: ‘I made it for you.’

Before I knew what was happening, he kissed me, unbuttoned my

blouse, pulled it over my head and turned the sleeves into a knot around my wrists. It happened so fast that I was taken by surprise. Dimitar tasted the chocolate to check that it was not too hot and spread it over my bare breasts. I didn't understand why I did not protest. He whispered tender words in my ear, which built up the tension and ensured my body tingled in anticipation of what was to come. His words conjured up nice images, dreams which could not be equalled even through the most passionate merging of bodies. I fantasized about sheets which stuck out like ice bergs and melted to a pile of white dust through the warmth of our bodies.

I wanted to shout out in pleasure. How was I supposed to end this game, if his touch made me weak at the knees?

I let myself be carried away by a wave of pleasure, unbuttoned his shirt and teased him with my tongue over his chest. He groaned softly as encouragement to go lower. I'm going to make you suffer, I thought to myself. This was an adventure based on a pre-determined plan. He had mercilessly broken Milena's heart and now it was my turn to put this self-obsessed playboy in his place.

The hard proof of his desire pressed against my underbelly. I enjoyed the thought that he had lost his self-control, but at the same time I wanted to leave little to chance.

'I'm still a virgin,' I whispered.

He looked at me like I was a rare antique.

'That's unexpected.'

'I know. Everyone thinks that I've had men by the dozen.'

'How do you get that reputation if you haven't done that?'

'That's what I ask myself also. Probably because of too many insignificant dates and a few boys who have publicly congratulated themselves on sleeping with me so as not to lose face.

Dimitar seemed shocked at this unexpected revelation. He had misjudged me and felt tricked.

'So, you don't want to have sex with me?' he asked to be sure.

'I certainly won't lose my virginity to a playboy,' I smiled innocently.

'Then I can't have a relationship with you.'

'As if I would want that. It was all a game from the start. A kind of bet with not too high a stake,' I blurted out.

'Did you bet on whether you could chat me up?' he asked with a wave of disbelief in his voice.

'Something like that.'

'With whom?'

'With myself.'

'And who else?'

'With one of the girls whose heart you broke.'

‘And now?’

‘The game is up.’

I put my clothes back on and blew him a kiss. Dimitar was glued to the ground. He could not believe that I would just leave him there. I could hardly believe it myself, because if anyone turned me on, it was him.

‘2-1. Mission accomplished,’ I mumbled to myself, while I walked home. I had given him a taste of his own medicine, but I did not get much joy from my victory. Dimitar was cute, sweet and romantic and I had turned him down. My body still trilled from excitement, it was as if it was also protesting.

Lies

My father travelled through America, Germany, Colombia, Argentina and the rest of the world to promote the rich Bulgarian culture through communist plays. Every time he would come back with interesting stories and presents.

A video recorder was so unique that some 'friends' only came around to watch Western movies and illegal MTV clips. Zapping through Bulgarian channels was a disappointing pastime: you could only choose from two Bulgarian and one Russian station, which were all rather similar. Friends joked that if you tried to zap further, the head of the secret service would appear on the screen warning: 'Stop zapping. It is a criminal offence to search for Western channels.'

There was no clear line between what was forbidden and what was allowed. We often knew instinctively what went against party expectations, even though that was not written down anywhere. Everything that was not explicitly allowed, was forbidden. However, nothing was impossible, you just had to find a way to reach your target without taking too much risk.

Nobody knew exactly how the Western films were smuggled into the country, but the quality was awful. We often watched a copy of a copy of a copy. The variation in genres was limited to bloody action movies, slapstick comedies and cheap porn. Compared to the respectable Bulgarian and Russian movies we were usually served; the Western videos were particularly mind-blowing. Especially the porn, because we never got to see naked people. Every time Anton brought along one of those tapes, we would watch the very revealing images wide-eyed and provide personalized commentary.

'Those two are using a creaky bed. Probably also imported from Russia? She's good looking, but he's so pale, he looks like a corpse.'

'Perhaps that's why he can't get it up. Have you ever seen a corpse with a hard-on? Oh, it's flipped out again.

Anton grinned. 'That is why you should never make your hobby your work. Look, a new guy had joined. Jeez, he's all shiny with body lotion. Apparently, that's not a waste of money in the West.'

'It's not here either, because you can't buy any in our country.'

'Ach, we're not that pathetic. We can always rub ourselves in with vegetable oil,' Anton suggested.

'And then my mother will surely ask what happened to her vegetable oil. Will you stand in the queue for an hour to get another bottle?'

I had to laugh at my conversations with Anton, but I was irritated by the poor quality of the videotapes he brought along. Once he

invited me to his house to watch Rambo. Whether it was the fault of his video recorder, I'm not sure, but there was no sound. That was weird: having Sylvester Stallone beat people up and firing guns without us hearing it. At a certain point, Anton came up with the bright idea of putting on the washing machine. That thing shook, rumbled, banged and made so much noise that Rambo no longer looked like a silent movie. It was a blessing that he still had such an old Russian washing machine. Ours was much quieter, but I immediately recognized the sound because our spin drier was the same Russian make. Even though I tried my best to 'centre' the washed clothes in the middle of the drum, the spin drier would rumble, rattle and bang each and every time. If I did not hold onto it during its spin cycle, then the machine would 'walk' from one end of the bathroom to the other and usually did not come back on its own.

Because many friends visited our house to watch Western video's, I sometimes got the feeling that I was running an illegal cinema. When my parents went away for the weekend to our villa in the mountains, our city home would turn into a disco. Thanks to my father's modern equipment they were all great parties.

Anton wanted to borrow the giant speakers for his birthday. It was Friday the 13th.

'Don't give him the speakers,' Olga said. 'A day like today can only mean accidents will happen.'

'Nonsense.' I retorted. 'I don't know who made that up, but there's no truth in it. You are so superstitious that you believe you'll have an accident if you walk under a builder's ladder.'

'It did happen once.'

'Did you distract him so much that he fell on top of you with his ladder?'

'Never mind, you don't believe me anyway. Do what you want, but if your friends damage the speakers, don't come running to me. I warned you.'

I thought about it. Friday the 13th. If you believed in that, then accidents will surely happen. My sister was born on Friday the 13th. She was very happy. And it was because she did not believe in superstition or religion, from which the unlucky number came in the first place. If you were not raised with religion, then you had no reason to believe that twelve apostles were better than thirteen at the Last Supper. Judas would have betrayed Jesus another time. The fact that Jesus was crucified on a Friday was just coincidence. And even if it wasn't, why should that influence my life? It was unbelievable that so many people in the world paid attention this unlucky day. My father told me after his tour in America that even hotel rooms skipped the number thirteen and sometimes even an entire thirteenth floor.

‘And, are you going to do it?’ Olga interrupted my musings.

A little while later we carried the giant speakers through the park. How we managed to get these monsters at their destination without inflicting any damage was a miracle. Luckily, we didn’t damage them, otherwise my punishment would have been severe. Friday the 13th seemed to be my lucky day.

The party was great. The music boomed out the giant speakers and we unsociably let the entire neighbourhood enjoy it with us.

‘Maybe we should turn the music down,’ the host said at about 2 a.m., after the neighbours had complained. That didn’t work, because everyone knew how to turn up volume, even the police, who came to check on us at 3 a.m. We eventually sent them home happy with a bottle of whisky. The system of corruption worked to everyone’s advantage, just like the system of thinking everything over twice. Even at parties we didn’t say what we thought or thought what we said, especially when it came to politics.

We were prisoners in time and didn’t know for how long. The West watched passively from the side-line and washed its hands in innocence. England even managed to give the Romanian leader Ceaușescu a knighthood, even though he was the cruellest of all communist leaders. Not only did he have his political adversaries assassinated, but he also carried out a disastrous economic policy which made Romania the poorest country in Europe. My grandmother would tell me in disgust about the scenes she had seen travelling through Romania. Straight on arrival she was besieged as a ‘rich foreigner’ by begging children who tried to get anything from her: from pens to sweets. I could hardly believe that our Romanian brothers were in such dire straits, because all communist countries helped each other. The Russians tried to steer the mutual relations as much as possible. Of course, this meant that things could go wrong, because there were 90 million people in total from seven different countries living under the influence of the Soviet Union. Romania apparently had the bad luck of going unnoticed in a severe spiral of poverty.

Despite all the lies for a long time we did not doubt that communism was better than capitalism. On the television, they repeatedly stressed that a democratic government with several parties was unworkable and we saw how Western politicians would turn on each other and how governments would fall suddenly. According to the reports Western citizens were far from happy and as proof we would see images of protests and strikes. We didn’t have that, because there was no reason to protest. Our planned economy didn’t possess the weaknesses of capitalism, where competition led to over-production, bankruptcies and labourers being laid off. We were lucky

to be living in an orderly and just society.

According to reports the grain harvest increased each year and the factories broke their production records time after time. Of course, we thought it strange that we never that those record produces in the stores, but it was needless to say that we were not allowed to ask any questions about that. We suspected that the Bulgarian government exported the grain to Russia. We didn't know how they done it, but since Khrushchev had come to power the Soviet Union had a shortage of grain and even imported it from capitalist countries. 'Do you know why the Russian party leader won the Nobel prize?' was the question in a well-known joke. 'He was the first man in history who sowed grain in Siberia and harvested it in Canada.'

It was unfathomable why the planned economy led to a shortage of simple products. In a time when astronauts could travel to the moon, we struggled to buy a good bar of soap or a decent pair of sunglasses. Only humour could soften our pain, because you could turn things around in a joke. A man had to choose between the communist and the capitalist hell. First, he takes a peak at the capitalist hell and asks what they do there. 'We cook you in oil and we cut you up into tiny pieces,' the answer was. In the communist hell, he got exactly the same answer.

'What's the difference then?' the man asks.

'The only difference is that in the communist hell they sometimes don't have oil, and other times no knives.'

Not only oil was scarce, but also electricity. Because our government exported so much to our 'brother countries', we often had to sit in the dark in the evenings. Very primitive, candles lit and holding philosophical discussions. This is only interesting if it doesn't happen too often. I didn't enjoy doing my homework to a measly light; it made me feel like a medieval monk. But that was no excuse for school not to make your homework. 'You need to learn how to plan better,' Comrade Taneva said. 'You know what time the electricity will be cut off.'

That was true, because the times were published in the media beforehand and with a little goodwill I could take that into account. My parents managed better than me, because they left work earlier to cook and shower before the regime took effect. If they hadn't finished their shower on time, then they had to finish in the dark.

Because the technicians were not that accurate with the switches, it often meant that people were stuck in elevators for hours on end, for example because they got in the lift at ten to six in the assumption that the regime took effect at six. Sometime neighbours would demolish the lift windows to get someone out who was panicking. Not through the window, that was quite small, but by pulling a certain

switch. That way the elevator would go to the next floor.

People would look out their window to see which flat ‘went on’ first. At the first flicker, you heard people rejoice. If it took too long before the other homes were lit, you heard cursing from the football fans who were afraid that their favourite team would score during the electricity disruption.

The worst thing was that the electricity also went out during the last episode of one of the most favourite soap operas, which was equivalent to national mourning. A few smart guys took out their car batteries and manufactured a special connection so that they could see the end after all. The end was then passed on by word of mouth.

Fainted

I tried to avoid Dimitar at school and that was quite easy. I noticed that he had been without a girlfriend for some time, but it did not occur to me to think that was my doing. Dimitar didn't approach me. Until I met him once on a ski slope outside the city. He followed me and I decided to ski straight through the woods. I saw a small path further on that went up the mountain and let myself go. It was only at the last moment that I noticed that there was a stream in the bend. I tried to jump it. I almost thought I had made it, until one of my ski's hit a stone. I fell in the icy snow, luckily just across the water.

'Are you okay?' Dimitar shouted. He had managed to come to a halt without falling.

'Fine,' I hastily said, even though I felt pain all over my body.

I suddenly fainted backwards with my knees locked. I hadn't seen it coming.

I woke in DImitar's arms.

'How long was I out?' was the first thing that occurred to me to ask.

'Not that long. I slapped you a few times and then you woke up.'

'You slapped me?'

Apparently, I must have felt better to sound so shocked.

'And a kiss,' he added.

'How dare you!'

'Calm down, I can never seem to do the right thing. No slapping, no kissing, what is it that you want?'

I hadn't thought about that, so I decided to leave it.

Dimitar and I skied to the mountain hut.

'I have a room here,' he said. 'You can leave your wet suit to dry. And don't think I have an ulterior motive. I might not be an angel, but I'm not the devil either.'

I agreed to go to his room. I took off my wet suit and wrapped a blanket around me. We sat in silence on the bed. Every second of silence seemed to be filled with tense expectation.

'Don't you think we could make a go of it?' he asked. I didn't sense any provocation in his voice and that reassured me.

'I don't know. I think you're attractive, but I don't want a relationship with a playboy. Maybe we should just accept that we're not meant for each other.'

'You are really attached to that image you have of me, aren't you?'

I now knew he was not some reckless womanizer, but I didn't want to admit that. His romantic side had made too much of an

impression on me and I was afraid to fall under his power. I preferred to have control. I knew that Dimitar wanted to have sex, but I didn't even want to admit to myself that I was also open to this at this point. Deep inside I was a prudish girl, because this was part of my upbringing. Sex was not discussed, the subject matter could not be found in any magazine, your parents told you nothing and the sex education at school was limited to information over the fertilization of an egg by a seed. That was very brief, but we didn't dare ask any questions so as not to embarrass the teacher and also not to give ourselves a bad reputation.

Olga was the only one with whom I could openly discuss this taboo subject. I vividly remember the first thing she told me about this subject: that my parents had sex. As a thirteen-year-old girl I found this difficult to believe. My parents had a good relationship and still walked hand-in-hand like a couple in love, but still I thought they were too old to play dirty games in bed.

I was determined not to pay any attention to Olga's chatter, until a school friend told me that she had caught her parents in bed. That was a sign that I had apparently missed something.

'How am I supposed to ask Mum and Dad if they still have sex?'

My sister burst out laughing confronted with so much curiosity and naivety.

'Just don't ask, because they won't tell you anyway,' she advised. 'Do you think they would tell you something like that?'

My sister was right: I had to think up a trick question to get an honest answer. Perhaps I should ask them how often they have sex instead of if they even had sex? After thinking it over for a while and practising in front of the mirror, I approached my mother.

'Mum, how often do you do it?' I asked very seriously.

She stood petrified like a mummy. It seems as if my question hadn't gotten through to her. The long silence made me uncomfortable, but I didn't dare repeat my cheeky question. My mother's expression suddenly changed, as if she had just woken up in shock by a nightmare. She went completely mad.

'How dare you ask about such private affairs?'

It was no use trying to explain that my question wasn't meant to be personal, but that I just wanted to know if adults who don't want any (more) children still had sex. My mother was so outraged that she even got my father involved. That was her trump card. Every time she thought it was above her to get into a discussion with such a small and brainless creature, she would get him to re-educate his foolish daughter.

'Repeat what you just asked me!' my mother ordered.

I had to choose between two evils. If I asked the question again,

the situation would escalate further, so I decided to ignore her order and keep my mouth shut. I wish I had listened to my sister! When my mother realised that I had no intention of saying anything, she repeated the question herself. My father looked shocked, as if he wanted to say: 'Did we really put that much energy into raising such a rude child?'

'That's none of your business,' was his redeeming reply.

'Get out of the room.'

'And?' my sister asked out of curiosity when I walked into the other room.

'Just don't ask. They're both angry. And they said nothing. But I think I know the answer. They didn't deny anything, so they do have sex. If they didn't then they wouldn't have been so annoyed.'

'Okay, enough nonsense,' my sister resolutely said and grabbed the telephone book to phone her boyfriend for the umpteenth time. If you didn't know she was studying to become a violinist, you would think she wanted to be a receptionist. She never got bored with the telephone and she could stay on it for hours on end. The upstairs neighbours, who lived on the second floor of the house, sometime bonked on the floor in exasperation as a sign that they also wanted to use the line, because the duplex line meant we had to take turns. But we were still lucky, because without the right connections you couldn't even get a duplex line. You had to wait years to be connected. The upstairs neighbour also had a boyfriend she could talk to for hours on end, but we often used to throw a spanner in the works. The duplex box hung in our hallway and if we needed to use the line we simply pressed on a button to disconnect her. She probably didn't even realise this, because disconnections occurred often.

A consequence of the taboo on sex were the numerous teenage pregnancies. In the big cities, the girls would carry out abortions and some even used it as a regular contraception. In the country, it was much worse: nearly the whole village would know that a girl was pregnant before she did. In the villages, a date was more or less tantamount to an engagement and although arranged marriages were not common, many diligent parents found a way to match their child to an approved candidate.

As a city girl, I luckily did not have to experience this, but in our villa in the mountains I heard poignant stories from my village peers. Our neighbour Wanja was only 17 years old and already married. She was terrified she would get pregnant. Contraception was an unknown phenomenon. There was no pill, a coil was not recommended for women who had not yet had children and the majority of men were insulted if they had to use a condom. Wanja had no other choice than

wait for the unwanted pregnancy to arrive.

'Why did you get married so young?' I asked her one time.

'Out of ignorance,' was her surprising answer. 'My parents had arranged a date with because he came from a good family. This was my very first date and I did not know what to do. We soon thought that we matched and proposed that we got married. Marriage? I thought I was too young, but he claimed that that was the only way I could prove that I loved him. And I didn't want to lose him.'

'And your parents? Did the not stop you when you said you were getting married?'

Wanja sighed. 'On the contrary. My future husband came from a well-off farming family, so I would not have any financial worries. I didn't think that was important, but as usual I listened to my parents. After my engagement, I regretting it greatly, but I couldn't turn back time. You might be able to call off an engagement in the city, but in a village, everyone would find it disgraceful. Besides they all thought I had already slept with him. No one in the village wants a second-hand bride.'

I felt sorry for Wanja. She was that afraid she would get pregnant that she often rejected sex with her husband. That put a lot of pressure on their relationship and she was even looking for clues that he was cheating on her. 'I can use that against him,' Wanja said. 'But I won't get divorced. Friends have told me that it's impossible. Even women who are abused find it difficult to leave their husband, because the communists don't want to ruin their nice statistics with a large number of divorces. A woman in our village was always covered in bruises and when her husband tried to strangle her she finally had enough evidence to get a divorce. Still she didn't go through with it. Turning him in would have meant their children would grow up without a father, because he would have had to go to prison.

'It's better to have no father than such an animal,' I responded coolly.

'That's easy for you to say. There's not as much gossip in the city and as a divorced woman you're not dragged through the mud. In a village, you are constantly reminded of your past.'

I tried to think of moving house as a possible option, but the party's strict housing policy didn't take personal situations into account. Quite a lot had to happen if you wanted to get permission to move to another town. For example, you had to have a husband who was already an inhabitant of that town, but of course a recently divorced and bitter woman had no intention of starting a new relationship.

I pretended that we were not so prudish as the previous generation, but apparently, I was wearing blinkers, because Wanja's

story was proof that the moral views in the villages had not substantially changed. That reminded me of my own parents. Through prudishness I had almost not been conceived and once I had been, I was actually an accident. My mother was halfway through her training at the music academy and had no desire for children. It was nearly a miracle that she and my father had made it so far. My mother's prudishness knew no limits and each time he got intimate, she didn't want to see him for a while. The worst thing was that once my mother listened to a secret tape, on which her loved had taped a romantic conversation with a girlfriend. He invited her to visit him, but she claimed it was impossible. 'The only thing that's impossible, is trying to remove your underpants over your head,' was my father's reaction.

My mother was outraged. She had been raised with values and norms and could not stand his vulgar remark, so she broke off the relationship. My father sent flowers, apologised a thousand times and even got her parents involved as mediators. He made sure that he didn't blow his second chance, which he was finally given.

Thanks to the moral accomplishments of communism my generation also grew up protected, but it was now common to be intimate with your steady boyfriend and that you didn't have to wait before marriage to sleep with each other. Except in the villages, where prudishness formed an immense social problem. We played the communist game without giving it much thought, but girls like Wanja were always the losers, because problems were never discussed. As prisoners of the system we told white lies of we wanted to keep something silent and if we had to tell the truth we also lied to prevent complications. We were passengers in a car, driven by a drunk party leader, who ignored all the rules. You don't just get out of a car that's driving at high speed.

Western tourists

‘Mer, you’re just like a butterfly. Each time I want to catch you, you fly away,’ Dimitar moaned, after I had agreed to carefully build on a kind of intimate friendship.

‘Maybe you want to catch me too fast?’ I replied.

‘Too fast! Until known I have shown the patience of a saint, but apparently, you haven’t noticed.’

I saw the vein in his neck beat intensely. Anger and passion were a remarkable combination.

‘Mer, I’ve fallen in love with you. Do you love me too?’ he whispered.

It was as if I had been waiting for that question. Dimitar sounded so hopelessly pathetic that it made me shiver. Where was the self-assurance, the intriguing personality, that I had fallen for? I found the idea that he wanted to claim me for himself suffocating, because I felt so happy without a steady relationship.

‘Luck is just like decorating a home,’ Olga had said once. ‘Throw away all the rubbish and give all the valuable things pride of place.’ Dimitar didn’t belong in my soul’s home. It was strange that I felt so attracted to him without loving him.

‘Give your friend everything his heart desires and at the same time he’ll realise that there is more,’ I said out loud.

Dimitar looked at me questioningly. I was not planning to give a straight answer to his declaration of love. I was afraid that he would not accept it, so I asked him about his future plans.

‘I want to leave this country as soon as possible. I would love to go to America,’ he replied.

I was amazed by the calm way he talked about it. Communism was already exhibiting some cracks, but feeling to the West was still serious. The funny thing was that Dimitar had predicted his future without a crystal ball. A few years later he married in America, a marriage of convenience. Once he had found a good job, he got a divorce. I heard from his sister that he soon remarried, this time out of love. What surprised me the most was the end of the story: Dimitar had gotten a second divorce and went to live as a monk in a monastery. How large was the change from playboy to monk, I asked myself?

I didn’t see myself studying holy scripture, but life still had its surprises. Funnily enough fate also took me to America. Admittedly in a roundabout way, but I did go there. I was almost hypnotised by the flashing and rolling sea of lights of Las Vegas.

A limousine stopped close by. No one got out. Out of curiosity I

tried to catch sight of the passenger, but that was impossible. A few hours previously I had been driven through Las Vegas in a similar limousine with tinted windows and I could see everyone, but no one could see me. Now the tables were turned: the passengers could see me, but I couldn't see them. I recalled the Bulgarian limousines: all black Russian cars, reserved for the party elite. For the ordinary mortals, bureaucracy was part of the car purchase: you placed your name on an endless list, put down a deposit and hoped that one day you would actually get it. There were very little cars imported and my parents were lucky to be able to buy one after seven years. You often had to wait ten years or longer to buy a Lada or Trabant.

We could even laugh at this undesirable situation. 'You can pick your Trabant up in exactly ten years' time,' the garage owner says. 'Would you prefer the morning or the afternoon?'

'What do you think is better?' the buyer asks.

'In the afternoon, because the mechanic will be present then.'

We were eligible for a 'ZAZ', a Russian car with the appearance of a bumper car. Of course, we would have preferred a Lada, but then we would have to wait for another few years. My father didn't want to buy a second-hand car, because that was more expensive than a new one. This is the way the communist market forces worked: if you didn't want to wait for years, you had to pay more.

In any case I was pleased it wasn't a Trabant. I had sat in my uncle's Trabi enough times to know that the two-stroke engine completely overshadowed the radio. It was simply impossible to hold a conversation at a slightly increased speed, or you had to shout the whole time. The suspension was so hard that every hole in road made my head hit the roof of the car. Some Trabant passengers got queasy from exhaustion fumes because the air for the radiator passed through the exhaust.

My uncle claimed that he had the longest four-wheeler: three metres of car and ten metres of smoke. The Trabant did seem to have been designed to ruin the air. The only good thing about it was that it was of a type of plastic, Duroplast, which meant it lasted longer. This way the drivers could avoid the holes in the road following the necessary repairs. This was quite tricky and favourite hobby of every experienced driver. Only beginners, such as my uncle, braced themselves and steered the Trabant straight through the holes, so as not to end up on the wrong side of the road. That wasn't any safer, because once when he was driving the clutch came loose in his hands. This was usually mounted on the steering column but after a few large holes it had spontaneously broken off.

Although we were very happy with our ZAZ to start off with, it seemed it was just as bad as a Trabi. On our way to the Black Sea we

had to stop regularly to let the car breathe. My father would pop the hood and wait until the engine had cooled down before we drove any further. Despite these precautions, about halfway the engine overheated anyway. Even worse: one of the parts had melted and we had to spend the night in the garage, because working quickly wasn't in their vocabulary.

My sister and I slept in the car, which had been taken apart. Our parents found two old chairs in the work place, surrounded by dirt, grease, rusty bolts, worn tyres and unreliable looking spare parts. No one slept in this strange environment. When we reached the Black Sea the next day, we were all just as hot and bothered as the engine of our Russian car.

I was looking forward to a carefree holiday, but after waiting so long for a car, it seemed my father had forgotten what he had learned during his driving lessons. On the second day, it happened. He reversed in a narrow street and rammed into a metal trash can. There was no time recover from the shock, because when he tried to avoid the trash can on his second attempt, he rammed into the communist party building. The façade had no damage at all, but the bumper of our brand-new car lay on the ground and both headlights were broken. Luckily, we did not have to spend the night in the garage this time round.

A holiday at sea is a culture shock time and time again. The beaches were invaded by a colourful mixture of Western tourists without any morals: Swedish women with bare breasts, Dutch men with long hair, French with tattoos and German machos with earrings in both ears. We were amazed at all this immorality and were surprised that this was allowed in all these countries. On the other hand, we were jealous of their cars and clothes.

The *Neckermann* catalogue was passed from hand-to-hand in Bulgaria as proof of the existence of a world of pretty and strange fashion. The catalogue had become greasy and dirty from the hundreds of fingers that had turned the pages to discover clothes and appliances that we could only dream of. When a group of Germans told me that this thick book filled with desirable articles was distributed free-of-charge in the West, my mouth dropped open in surprise.

The same Germans claimed that there was a special vinegar store in the town we were staying in. I didn't believe it, but they insisted and we finally went to visit it together. I already saw from the outside that they were wrong: it was a state-run store for groceries. Once inside most of the shelves were empty. Everything had gone, except the vinegar and the salespeople displayed that on as many shelves as possible.

I was ashamed of our party's failing planned economy. The Germans beamed.

'You see, you didn't even know they had special stores for vinegar in your country.'

'No, I didn't know,' was the only thing I could say.

Almost every day I walked past the fence of a holiday camp on the beach. Most of my friends spent their summers in camps in the mountains or at sea, which mostly cost nothing, because they were subsidised by the communist party. I was never allowed to go, because my parents were afraid that I would come into contact with sex, smoking and alcohol. I couldn't suppress my jealousy: my peers were free to do what they wanted, while I had to do my parents' bidding.

Of course, my perception of the holiday camps was strongly romanticised. My peers weren't that free. They had to play a cat and mouse game if they wanted to escape the constant supervision of the comrades. They were woken early each day with the sounds of a fanfare and every day they had to raise the national flag and sing patriotic songs.

My parents at least let me do as I pleased during the day, as long as I stayed close. My two-year younger sister was told to keep an eye on me. Actually, I was the one keeping an eye on her because she thought every sweet boy was her true love. I never fell in love and if I did, I didn't even dare to admit it to myself. A strong woman had to keep her feelings under control. That became more difficult when I met Bojan. I met him in a disco, where he unashamedly stared at me.

'Can I help you?' I asked

'I wish!' he replied.

It made me laugh. The ice was broken and it clicked sooner between us than it had ever between myself a stranger. I don't know if things would have gone differently if he had said something else. I was so fed up with men coming up to me with stupid questions like: 'Haven't we met before?' or otherwise with exaggerated compliments: 'I think you're the real reason behind global warming; you're so hot'. The remark 'I wish!' was simple, charming and I hadn't heard it before. Bojan was also so handsome that he earned a living as a model alongside his studies. He had a deep dimple in his chin and radiated endless energy. I was almost 18 years old and I had become fed up waiting for a knight in shining armour. Bojan was the perfect person to lose my virginity to, because he did not live in my town and if it didn't work out, then we didn't have to see each other again. After the holiday, I was bold and visited him in Sofia under the pretext that I wanted to visit my niece again. Bojan was delighted when he heard the news and rented a suite in one of the nicest hotels in the capital. When he closed the door behind me I felt my knees go weak. I was

almost certain that it was going to happen and was mostly afraid of the unknown.

Bojan took a box of matches out of his pocket. ‘We’re going to play a game.’

He grabbed the box and ticked his index finger against the side. It tipped over and fell on the flat side. ‘The flat side means that I can ask you a question,’ he explained. ‘You have to give an honest answer. We’ll take turns. If it falls on the narrow side, then the other person has to carry out a request here and now.’ Bojan shoved the matchbox towards me. I ticked it and it fell on the flat side. A question.

‘How many girls have you slept with?’

‘About ten. Now it’s my turn. The flat side again. Do you enjoy your nipples being sucked?’

‘Only when it’s done tenderly. Now it’s my turn again. Flat side. What are your erogenous zones?’

‘You’ll have to find out for yourself.’

Now it was my turn. The narrow side, I was allowed to make a wish. That was harder than I thought. If I wished something erotic, then the game would probably end pretty quickly, and I was just starting to enjoy it. The box of matches gave you an insight into someone’s past, desires and secrets. I couldn’t think of a better wish thank asking Bojan to top up my wine glass.

‘Gosh, that’s original,’ Bojan sighed and topped up my glass. He ticked the box of matches and how he could also make a wish. His face was so close by that I could count the brown flecks in his green eyes. ‘Take off an item of clothing of your own choosing.’

I didn’t want to expose myself yet, even though the hotel room was sweltering hot. I could never figure out the system of district heating. All the hotels and apartments in the large cities were connected to large plants that heated up the water, but neither the hotel rooms nor the houses had their own thermostat. If you were too warm in the winter, you had to open the windows. Efficiency was not part of communism. Better hot than cold, the party leaders must have thought. The people didn’t care, because it didn’t affect their wallets. Not only were the prices of the most important groceries mostly symbolic, neither did water, heating or rent make a large dent in the family budget.

Every time I visited friends in apartments, I felt like I was visiting a sauna. I felt the same in this luxury hotel, but Bojan hadn’t deserved a striptease yet. Of course, I had to take something off, because he had made a wish. I wore black pantyhose underneath my skirt. I pulled my skirt up, pulled off the pantyhose and demonstratively pulled my skirt down again.

‘We’re not getting far, are we?’ I laughed happy at the thought

that it could take a long time at this rate before I had taken all my clothes off. I hadn't considered the fact that he could also have asked me to take all my clothes off at once. I grabbed the magic box. It fell on the flat side.

'Have you ever made love to a man?'

'No, not yet. And I probably won't either. And you? Have you ever slept with a woman?'

We had forgotten all about the matchbox and started asking each other questions in turn.

'I was once approached by a girl at ski-camp,' I answered. 'I was shocked at first and said I wanted to think about it. The next day she had to go home suddenly. So, nothing happened. By the way, it's my turn to ask a question. Why did you take me to a hotel room instead of inviting me to your house?'

'It's not because I realized I couldn't do anything disrespectful at home with my parents,' Bojan replied. 'Of course, I'm secretly hoping you want to go as far as I do, but that's your own choice.'

'I'm not sure what I want. Shall we continue with the game? Ask me a question.'

'No, I have a wish. Will you let me watch you masturbating?'

'Gosh, that's kind of private.'

'Do you still know the rules of the game or should I throw the matchbox on its narrow side first?' His eyes laughed ironically.

'Don't bother, because you'll eventually get lucky.' I pulled my skirt up, shoved my panties to the side and started rubbing myself. A little while later I was shivering from top to toe from the powerful contractions.

We didn't sleep all night. Rivers of desire streamed through our bodies and kept on looking for ways to come together. The game had made us so honest and open with each other that nothing could go wrong. Not even losing my virginity, but Bojan didn't go through with it. He seemed to realise I was still unsure and didn't want to force anything.

'Are you sure you don't want to come inside me?' I asked when it was almost light.

'I do, but you don't,' he replied. 'And I don't mind at all. This was a night to remember.'

In love with a corpse

I was almost 18 years old and in love. I was in love with him, like my peers were in love with footballers, actors and singers. Unfortunately, I couldn't show off my idol. He was a dead author, who most likely had also been gay. But I didn't care: I'd rather have a platonic relationship with Oscar Wilde than a passionate relationship with the prettiest guy in town. I hadn't only fallen for this English author's charming quotes, but also fallen in love with the bourgeois' lifestyle that he described and was so abhorred in communist times. His works were not dry philosophical works on love and life. They were pearls of competing and provocative thoughts.

My circle of friends did not show any interest for Oscar Wilde's literature. Except for Anton. That was no coincidence because his courtliness and good manners made it seem like he was partly living in the 19th century. Anton was very smart, so smart that he didn't have to prove himself to anyone. 'Extremely smart people seem difficult, but you can actually control them better than stupid men,' Olga had once told me. I didn't doubt that. Stupid men always wanted to prove themselves, which always caused problems. Smart men knew what they were made of and didn't need to rub your nose in it.

I was torn by an inner battle. I wanted to have an intelligent husband. Anton was the only one my parents would approve of and yet I was hesitant. What worried me was that I couldn't picture my friend as a passionate lover. He brought me red roses, gave me nice compliments and always came when I needed him, but it seemed to be more courtesy than passion. He never showed in any way that he fancied me. We only looked each other deep in the eyes when we had passionate discussions.

Anton knew that I was constantly on the lookout for new adventures. Why did I deliberately choose to ignore an intelligent and charming man and throw myself in the arms of men I knew beforehand wouldn't be right?

As usual I found the answer in one of my idol's books. 'Most people die of a sort of creeping common sense, and discover when it is too late that the only things one never regrets are one's mistakes.' Even though it was strange, I did not regret any of the mistakes I had made. And if I did, I could again find solace in Wilde's literature: 'It is not a bad thing to regret the things you have done every now and then. At least it is better than regretting the things you did not do.'

Towards the end of my grammar education communism started to show visible cracks. The regime was a bit less strict. The national school uniform was suddenly done away with. Our Director

immediately introduced a new one, to emphasize that we were an elite school. But no one commented if you shortened your long skirt. One friend of mine cut it that short that it became a mini skirt.

Most of us didn't dare go that far. I was happy that I could wear larger earrings and that I had no longer had to see the Director to explain why I wasn't wearing a bra. I was certain that my breasts didn't need any support, because I used Anton's 'pencil method'. If the pencil that I had placed under my breasts fell on the ground, then they were still fine. If the pencil stuck, then my breasts were saggy.

Our many years of friendship kept on balancing on the edge of intimacy, even when Anton started a steady relationship. Nothing pointed to the situation changing, until one night when we were playing chess and enjoying a good bottle of wine. I was winning and when I managed to promote a pawn to a queen, the outcome was obvious. He sighed and shook my hand.

'It's as if I see you on the chess board, Mer.'

I looked at him questioningly, but suddenly I realized what he meant. Anton had seen me change from a girl to a lady in the course of time. Not that I considered that to be a compliment, because that was a natural development, but I did like to hear that I had turned into a lady.

'Do you want to play another game?' I proposed.

'No, I would rather chat with you on the sofa,' Anton replied.

He suddenly put his arms around me and tried to find my lips. I wanted to pull back just as much as I wanted to taste him. My mind hung somewhere undecided in mid-air.

'Don't you have a girlfriend?' I mumbled.

'We ended our relationship a few days ago,' he said without any emotion in his voice.

I didn't have much time to think. I had to make a quick decision whether I wanted to jeopardize our friendship. Could someone who had been a good friend for so many years suddenly become a lover? Was that a smart move or a stupid one? I would have rather had a few more minutes to think things over, but Anton pulled me towards him. His tentative kiss made me dizzy. The cogs in my head were working overtime, but the whole thing only lasted two minutes before I pulled away. The kiss was a big mistake. It was just strange that it didn't feel like a mistake.

Anton also took a breather. For the first time, I noticed how sexy my friend of many years was: his expression, his muscular body, his obvious bulge in his tight trousers. My body trembled with lust, but my brains were still protesting.

'This is happening too quick,' I said, although that cost me a lot of willpower. 'Maybe you are my true love, but you need to prove it first.

Anton didn't answer. Instead he dropped his trousers and underpants in one fluid movement. I stood still and stared at his perfect masculinity. I felt a shiver rush through my body when I stroked his muscular chest down to his flat stomach. He stroked my hardened nipples, wet them and softly blew on them. I gasped in surprise at this new sensation. In self-defence, I grabbed his penis tightly. His groaning told me he was losing self-control. My heartbeat was galloping away. Was there no middle ground between the mind and emotions?

I tried to say something again, but Anton claimed my lips.

'I like women who kiss, because then they have to be silent,' he whispered.

I silently thumped him in his stomach, but I instinctively realized there was no point in fighting him. My body was apparently following a different logic from my mind. His experienced hands blocked every escape route.

The next few days we spent enjoying every nuance of desire, as if we were swept away by a wild river of passion. Every nerve in our bodies vibrated from excitement and the journey always ended in a waterfall, in a spectacular fall in the depths. Anton always waited until I had lost control before he let himself go. He had surpassed my expectations and I had no regrets at all that we have turned our friendship into pure lust. In the meantime, we tried every possible position from the Kama Sutra book, but then without the accompanying penetration. Some complicated positions gave us cramp, a stiff neck or the giggles.

Even though I was nearly 18 years old, my mother wouldn't let me wear make-up. She called that natural beauty. Natural no way! My beauty had to be emphasized and if I got spots, the blemish had to be covered up.

One day I left home and walked towards a parked car as usual to put on my make-up in front of the wing mirror.

'You don't need that.' The window suddenly rolled down and I was startled that there was someone in the car, and I hadn't seen them.

'Oh yes, I've heard that before. You sound just like my mother,' I cheekily retorted.

'Is that why you don't put on your make-up at home, but use my mirror instead?'

The man's voice sounded familiar. I looked at his face and opened my mouth in surprise when I recognized Trajan. Was this really the man I had fallen for a few years ago, and whom my parents wouldn't let me see again? He had changed so much. His boyish features now had an attractive masculine appearance.

‘Do you recognize me?’ I suddenly asked as if I doubted it was really him.

‘How could I forget the only woman who has ever shot me?’ he said with a charming smile. ‘If you’re not seeing anyone, then maybe we could have a drink?’

I stared at him, with half my make-up on and seemed to have lost my voice.

‘So, what do you think?’ Trajan asked when he thought I had been silent long enough.

‘I need to finish putting on my make-up first.’

He waited patiently and then we walked to the closest bar. I was usually not attracted to men that my parents didn’t approve of, but Trajan still formed the exception to this unwritten rule. The next few weeks I spent looking forward to our secret rendezvous.

Trajan was a proper gentleman. He always let me go first, helped me into my coat, opened all the doors and even kissed my hand a few times. Very old-fashioned, but it made me feel like a real lady. In the end love is not only content, but also form. Trajan obviously thought about his tactics carefully, because he gave me many gifts, but never that many that it seemed like he was bribing me. Besides he always kept enough distance to be desirable. He was a dream guy and I was happy that my dreams had not be censored by my parents, because in reality I knew it would never work out. My parents wouldn’t allow someone who tried to earn a living selling paintings to get involved with their daughter.

In the end, I had to tell a white lie to get rid of Trajan, because I didn’t want to hurt him. All sorts of thoughts whirled in my head and bumped into each other.

‘The best lie is the truth,’ my sister advised me when I confessed my innermost feelings in the evenings.

‘He won’t accept that,’ I replied after some thought. ‘Theoretically we live in a classless society. You explain to him that the literati consider themselves to be a better class. We’re actually snobs, it’s all for the sake of appearances. I have to be dating a professor at least to meet my parents’ expectations. Where am I supposed to find someone like that, who was young and besides just as charming and handsome as Trajan?’

My sister shrugged her shoulders.

I knew she couldn’t help me, because she was also looking for love. She was in love with a man who was ten years older than her. My parents said this made him a selfish person who was trying to ruin their daughter’s violin career and didn’t let him go until he left our house in tears and promised to leave my sister alone.

My feelings for Trajan became stronger and that confused me. My

friends and family would not accept him, so there was no point in staying together. My heart ached at the thought of letting him go, but I did not want to disappoint my parents. They had invested so much time and energy in me with the hope that someday I would match their expectations.

I knew by now that honesty was not always served with the truth and yet I gambled incorrectly by telling him the truth.

'What did you want from me? Just a piece of fun between the sheets?' His pretty eyes had changed into dark pools of hate and incomprehension.

'I never promised you a serious relationship,' I muttered.

'I don't like games, Mer. I gave you my soul and the whole time you used it to brush up your vanity.'

'I simply couldn't resist you because I liked you so much. I thought the intensity of our attraction would decrease in time and that we would each go our separate ways. I didn't want to mislead you. When I was with you I always thought of the present, the future just didn't interest me because the present was so fantastic. And if you still think I was playing games: I soon realized I was losing.'

'And because you don't like to lose, you decided to dump me?'

I ran to the bathroom and washed my face with cold water. I tried in vain to sort out the chaos of thoughts that flooded me.

When I returned to the room, Trajan had disappeared. My emotions again came to the forefront. I felt a slight disappointment, but also a certain relief. We didn't need to talk any further and I didn't need to try to cover up my true feelings for him. Maybe it was better this way, for both of us.

From communism to capitalism

At the start the Bulgarian communists did not embrace glasnost or perestroika. Some Russian newspapers and magazines were taken off the shelves, because they printed too many truths. If a neighbour renovates his house, that doesn't mean we have to do the same, the part leaders must have thought.

During my school years, the party dictatorship was so matter of course that no one even tried to conspire against them. Besides we had been lucky with our dictator, because at least he had a sense of humour. Party leader Zjivkov turned his pockets inside out during a conference on required investments, with the statement: 'Look for yourself. I'm broke and I have no money for investments.'

That incident didn't surprise me, because I was certain that he had deposited the stolen millions in foreign bank accounts. This way our leader could turn his pockets inside out without any problem and reduce himself to one of us. He was really a simple soul who had come to power by accident because he was at the right place at the right time. If Russia didn't support him, this balding man would never have climbed into the engine of our history and certainly not sat behind the control panel for so long.

We were secretly jealous of the Russians because of the glasnost in their country. Olga even circulated the joke that the Bulgarian government was planning to invade the Soviet Union to save communism.

The reality of course was a little bit different, because the East-European countries didn't dare to do away with communism for fear of military reprisals from Russia. In 1989 the satellite states realized they no longer had to be afraid. Gorbachev allowed them to more or less form their own future. The Hungarians carefully started to cut away the barbed wire on the border with Austria. In just a few months' time 200.000 East German citizens fled via Hungary to West Germany. The communists had to find some way to stop the massive exodus from the worker's paradise before it was too late.

The only peaceful solution for the East German government was to open the borders. That happened on 9 November 1989 and we watched incredulously and surprised at the euphoria of the Germans. One of the most iconic images in history, the German-German border, no longer existed. The East Germans could get into their Trabants and simply cross the border. It seemed surreal that just recently there were wooden structures on both sides of the Brandenburg Gate, from which you could look out on the enemy. Sometimes two groups of people would simply stare at each other. And now that was all over, as if

such scenes had only existed in the lively fantasies of writers. Would we ever be able to travel freely to the West? I wondered. The answer to that question came sooner than I thought.

Olga called me the next day to tell me that the leader of the Bulgarian communist party had been removed from power. I thought it was a silly joke, but within a few hours the whole city was buzzing with rumours. We almost talked in a whisper, because just imagine it wasn't true and someone from the secret service was listening to us! Normally we weren't afraid that someone was eavesdropping, but this was a serious matter. Removing a communist leader from power was tantamount to a revolution. A revolution without a drop of blood being spilled. It sounded too good to be true.

It wasn't completely true. There had been a change in leadership. A communist minister replaced our party leader, who was sent for a well-earned pension after many words of thanks. Of course, it was involuntary, but during communism hardly anything was on a voluntary basis. You could see on the television images that our happy dictator could hardly believe the news himself. His surprised expression spoke volumes. Everything was possible now, because if someone could replace the most powerful party leader, then it was possible to do that to his replacement also.

The euphoria spread like a forest fire in a country where it hadn't rained in years. We were no longer controlled by fear. The violence could no longer be hidden behind lies, while the same lies were defended with violence. The previous generations had been prepared to sacrifice their present for the future. We weren't any longer.

The communist ideal was corrected itself by reality. It was too good to be true that everyone was equal and no one was unemployed. Apparently, this didn't work out in real world. The party had discovered the holy grail: if you create equality in poverty, then no one feels poor. We considered the hunger in some African countries to be poverty and not the lack of luxury articles on the Bulgarian market.

We were breathing the air of freedom and could hardly imagine that we had been silenced just a few months before. Should I blame myself and my generation for swallowing the party's complete nonsense at face value instead of revolting against it? We were simply scared for an elusive higher power. We were trapped in a vicious circle, which we could hardly break through with our own strength. Only the higher power, the party, could do that. Even though this scenario seems completely unbelievable, a miracle had happened. The communists thought the change in leader would make them stronger, but all of a sudden out of nowhere small opposition groups were set up. The floodgates had been set open.

We were finally free and that meant real elections. The

competition was between the reds, the communists, and the blues, a conglomeration of various anti-communist parties and groups. I was 18 years old, I was allowed to vote for the first time and for the first time there was a choice. My Dalmatian dog had a blue balloon fastened to his collar, the colour of the opposition. When my grandparents saw that they threw the door shut in my face. That was how awful they thought my anti-communist provocation was. I heard they cried together after that incident, because they loved me and didn't want to push me away. Yet at this point in time there were more important things than my grandparent's sorrow. I had to participate in a large manifestation to show my support for the opposition.

We cut open the many years of silence with the scissors of the first massive protest. It was a celebration to be able to shout 'Long live the communist party, but only in our memories'. Some of my peers had made banners with texts such as 'Hurray, our teachers no longer have to twist the truth' and 'Lies have short legs, the communists only have toes'.

Olga had found a large old flag somewhere and carefully cut out the images of the hammer and sickle. Everyone around us wanted to hold the flag with the hole. For the first time, we felt connected to thousands of strangers by the power of a joint belief. Now that we were actually protesting against communism, we felt the strength of comradeship, which the communists had been promoting all those years. Only we were not allowed to use the word comrade any longer, because that word had some stigma attached to it. We even had to address the teachers at school with 'Mrs.' or 'Mr.' instead of 'comrade'. It sounded strange at first, but people soon got used to it.

At the end of the manifestation we walked home waving the flag. Nearly every passer-by smiled at the hole in the flag. Only a few angry old communists gave us reproachful glances, but even they didn't dare say anything. The spirit of the times had completely turned in just a few weeks' time. At least in the big cities. The countryside was still a bastion of communism. If we had waved the mutilated flag there, we would probably have been beaten up.

The party made good use of the achievements of the system by placing visions of terror in their minds about a government run by the opposition. They would lose their jobs because the land would be returned to their previous landowners, they would have to pay for their healthcare and the free market economy would mean that their wages and pensions would be worth nothing. To my ears, such threats sounded like lies from the propaganda machine, but the farmers all fell for them. In the end, it was the farmers with their common senses who were closer to the truth than the city intellectuals who believed

in the strength of the Western model. The worst scenarios became reality, while the opposition learned the hard way how to run a country.

I couldn't believe that the conversation topic of politics would weaken our strong family ties, but that was the case all over the country. Discussions led to broken friendships, violent arguments between colleagues and even divorces. My grandmother and grandfather could not understand why their granddaughter was on the side of the opposition. The fact that their son had also converted to the 'blues' was a slap in their face. Many people who had been loyal members of the communist party voted for the opposition after the revolution.

'Of course I haven't betrayed my old ideals,' my father said. 'My ideals have been betrayed by the party long ago, because it made promises it could not keep.'

'Perhaps our leaders met so often to prepare nice plans that they just didn't have the time to implement them,' I said.

My father smiled. 'It's a shame I'm no longer that naïve that I believe that. We were all ripped off by false history and media information. Even though I realized this after my travels to the West, it was dangerous to adjust my thoughts at a time when freedom of speech didn't exist. I couldn't overthrow a totalitarian system on my own.'

As soon as my father and other disappointed party members weakly believed that the new spirit of the time could not be put back in the bottle, they dared to give their real opinions. The euphoria erupted: we would quickly build another country. We hadn't realized that cleaning up the mess of communism would take years. The words of the famous Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn sounded nearly prophetic: 'The clock of communism has chimed its final hour. But the concrete colossus has not yet collapsed completely. Instead of freeing us, we might be crushed under the rubble.'

In the meantime, we all turned into guinea pigs and laboratory rats for capitalist experiments. Now we really had to tighten the belt and were also introduced to a coupon system, because ordinary groceries disappeared from the stores for a long time. The income from my father's lucrative concerts dried up, because the state no longer invested in culture. The prices rose dramatically, while the salaries remained the same.

Instead of equality in poverty, a gap between rich and poor soon arose. While the new rich were able to build castles, and import new cars after some shifty deals, more and more beggars appeared on the streets. For someone who had only seen such images in the movies, it was an extremely shocking experience. I looked in disgust while old

women would rummage through the trash bins, because they couldn't live on their pensions. The scarcity that the planned economy had created in the past was a blessing compared to this pathetic situation.

Market forces sounded like magic words, but they didn't turn out to be. Closing of unprofitable factories and the introduction of more efficient production methods led to gigantic unemployment and robbed people of a meaningful existence. The propaganda machine had emphasized for years that everyone in Bulgaria had a job, while people in the West were simply discarded. Now the new government was using the same method without any qualms.

The pressure of communism was replaced by the pressure for money. Was this an improvement? Some people thought so, others thought it was a scandalous descent into Western materialism.

We had freedom of speech to protest, but what use was that if it didn't help? As far as I was concerned they could take back their freedom as long as they fed the elderly. Besides, the media interpreted the new freedom incorrectly. The newspapers wrote what they wanted without any type of nuance. Criminal suspects were named and shamed, even before anything could be proved. All the news was accompanied with colourful commentary, mostly aimed at the communists. While previously the party would dismiss all facts as rumours, the media now presented all rumours as fact.

The new future had arrived, but after less than a year many people were fed up. They were without a doubt the most surprising years in the history of (East) Europe. It was just a shame that the surprises kept on coming, when we assumed they would disappear after the Wall had come down. There was freedom of travel, but people didn't have any money. You could finally live and work where you wanted to, but there was no work to be found. The party had turned into a living volcano that hadn't stopped smoking. The opposition dearly wanted to govern, but they didn't know how. It had become clear to all Bulgarians that freedom wouldn't still the hunger. Because state subsidies stopped, the prices of some products rose more than 100 percent. A pair of shoes could cost you a month's salary. Luxury consumer goods had become a moving target: each time you have saved the required amount, the prices rose. Where was the prosperity they promised? The great illusions were replaced with even greater disillusionment.

The hunger for freedom of speech decreased under the threat of real hunger. A visit to my grandmother's sister opened my eyes for the problems at the bottom of society. It was strange talking about a bottom, when not long ago we had all been equal. Yet I couldn't find any other word to describe the poverty I saw.

The flat that Aunt Veneta lived in was dismal. The plasterwork

had holes and cracks. The stairwell was dark, almost scary. The elevator didn't work, because the residents could no longer afford the maintenance fees. I rang the doorbell. Aunt opened the door with a big smile and led me to the living room. The wallpaper had seen better days and was partly coming loose. She still had an old-fashioned black and white television, which only worked when it wanted to. The furniture looked like it had taken a wrong turn on the way to the dump. The truth was that Aunt has never thrown anything away. Not that she was so attached to the saggy couch and the chairs with ripped upholstery, but because she didn't have any money to buy new ones. Her husband had died young and her daughter had contracted an incurable disease. Aunt had stopped working to care for her daughter and tried to make do on a widow's pension. When she told me how much she had to spend per month I was shocked. I sometimes blew that in one shopping spree.

'How can you live on so little money?' I asked truly surprised.

Aunt shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't buy anything I don't need. And I also don't buy the things I do need. It's no fun counting every penny. On the other hand, money worries are the only thing that distinguishes us from animals.'

I excused myself and quickly bought some things for lunch before Aunt could protest. I ordered everything in the neighbourhood store that looked somewhat appetizing and the two saleswomen quickly filled a few large plastic bags. I paid, but then realized I could hardly carry them. Luckily, I saw a few gypsy children on the pavement. I beckoned them to come and help. They begged anyway, this way they could earn their money. Together we carried the heavy bags to the third floor and I sent them off with a tip that seemed to please them.

Aunt ate as if she hadn't seen food in months. It was a touching scene. At the same time, I was embarrassed that I hadn't known that she had lived in such misery since the revolution. Only now did I realise why so many old people claimed to have been better off during communism. The prices of most of the essential groceries had not changed in years and the comfortable predictability of life meant you were never confronted with big problems, never mind with hunger.

After lunch Aunt walked towards the only remaining cupboard in the living room and took out a box of chocolates. I recognized the packaging. I had sent her that box for Christmas a few years ago, and the contents were well over their best before date by now.

'I was often tempted to open your gift and eat everything, but I managed to save it for dear guests,' Aunt said with pride in her voice.

Out of politeness I took an ancient chocolate, that had turned white. My Aunt ate the rest of the box, while she kept on apologizing for her greediness. I encouraged her with a smile. I had bought the

box specially for her and if I wanted I could buy chocolates on a daily basis. Of course, I couldn't say that out loud, because she couldn't imagine such a luxury.

It was a beautiful sight seeing someone enjoy a box of chocolates so much. I wish I could enjoy something as simple so intensely. That was my problem. My life had always gone without a hitch, I had always gotten everything I wanted and that had taken away my ability to enjoy the simple things. Of course, I had great life goals, but at that point in time I was almost certain that few things would give me more pleasure that watching Aunt devouring the chocolates.

We were no longer surprised by the passionate debates in parliament, which were televised live and we started to trust the politicians on their word less and less. Instead the young generation discovered a new faith: God, who had always been there, but had been made invisible in the background by the communists.

Religion wasn't forbidden during communism, but if you were seen in a church, that could have a negative impact on your career. If you were building paradise on earth, then you didn't need a God in heaven. The party had after all its own gods: Marx, Lenin and of course our own party leader Zjivkov.

My parents weren't introduced to religion, but one of my aunts would take me to the church every now and then to light a candle. I didn't understand many of the rituals. The singing was beautiful, but the priests' mumbling was completely incomprehensible. Sometimes they used to much incense that I had to agree with the communists: 'religion is the opium of the people.'

At Easter, we bent over to walk under Jesus' coffin, which had been placed on two tables. I'm not sure that this symbolic activity meant, but I was excited each time. Just like the candle that you lit in the church and took home while it was still burning. If the candle went out on your way home, that was a bad omen. It was quite a feat to protect the candle from the wind and that made the ritual especially exciting.

After the fall of the Wall, all kinds of Western religion and sects got a foot on the ground. I had found myself an explanation why all of Bulgaria had thrown itself to God. As long as everything was going well, we didn't need him, but in these uncertain times the Prophet was suddenly very welcome.

To me, such faith had a taste of hypocrisy. People who are happy, don't often believe in God, but if their life has a dramatic change, then they start to read the Bible. If they are healthy, they don't need the Lord, but if they are ill, old and rickety, then they bless themselves in church.

It was actually not that strange that the non-religious Bulgarian

people had suddenly stormed the churches en masse. Over the last few the years the communists had created a kind of religious mood, a feeling of obedience and admiration, which slotted perfectly into the ambience of the church. And this way all non-believing Bulgarians were converted from one day to the next.

Religion had become so cool that if I got lost in the city, I daren't ask my way any longer. In no time a number of people would show me the right way. To the Redeemer, to be clear. I could not explain that I hadn't lost my way in life, but just my way on the map. After we had said goodbye to dictatorship, none of the maps made sense. All the street names that sounded communist in some way had been changed. Sometimes three times in a row, because some new names had stigma attached to them.

Some of my peers had become so religious that I couldn't hold a normal conversation with them. They constantly pointed me to God, because they could always solve their problems in a chat with him. I thought it would be a wonderful idea to be able to do that also. No more worries, no unanswered questions and if you did something wrong, you blamed God for not protecting you from doing it.

I tried my hardest to become religious: I visited different churches, sang Psalms and read the Bible. But I remained doubtful. If there was an Almighty God, then this meant he was inside me and made mistakes with me.

Perhaps I didn't need to worry about his existence, because eventually he would forgive me my sins. After all, that was his job. Apparently, my unbelieving brain needed a more robust approach. Via a friend, I came to a church that would exorcise the devil out of me. The faithful made a circle and placed me in the middle, together with a few other strangers who had not yet seen the light. A little while later we were forcefully swung back and forth. The shouted out incomprehensible words that sounded like magical spells. I thought it was both funny and frightening at the same time. I didn't think about the light, but about the bruises I would be left with.

After the session, the faithful asked me straight away if I had seen the light. Sure. I was finally certain: I'm no longer going to search for God. If he wants me, let him give a sign. For someone who is almighty, that shouldn't be a problem. Besides, they say it's never too late to believe in God. In that case I was going to wait a while longer and intensify my search for a knight in shining armour. I thought the least God could do was arrange this for me, seeing as I had tried too hard to believe in him.

And God sent Anton. I could hardly believe that my old friend had turned to religion, just like that. He was totally changed and was just as intriguing and secretive as a Chinese hieroglyph. I still

recognised his charming behaviour and his intellect, but our conversations were now focused on God, because he had become a true emissary of the Lord.

The fact that Anton didn't want to surrender himself so easily, sharpened all my senses. I usually didn't dream about men, but for him I made an exception. In my dream, he was a priest in a pretty church. There was no one else there and I went to confess my sins to him. I told him that I recklessly flirted with men and that I regretted it. He pulled me into his strong arms and offered me consolation. Then he pressed his face in my hair and whispered softly: 'Perhaps you haven't met the right man. Let it come to you. The Lord will send him to you.'

Those were prophetic words. Under his fine robe, I felt his warm muscular body. His passionate kiss was like a bomb with a delay mechanism. I didn't know if he had set the timer, but I was certain the bomb would explode quickly. Anton moved his hands kneading and caressing over my upper body. His touch felt like the gateway to paradise. He kneeled in front of me, slid his tongue along my thighs and upwards and grabbed a piece of skin between his lips. I shook like an aspen leaf. My thighs were separated like they were begging him to discover their warmth and arousal. I felt like an opened packet of fireworks, in which someone had accidentally thrown in a sparkler. An explosion spread at the speed of light through my body and contracted all my muscles.

Daylight poured into the room. I was alone in bed. Reality was a downer after this super sensual experience, I thought to myself. Nice dreams can be deceiving. When you wake up, you are confronted with reality straight away, which puts your nice dream in a different perspective. In this regard, it might have been better to wake up from a nightmare. Then you appreciated reality all the more, because it did not resemble your nightmare in any way.

'Mer, I've seldom caught you with an optimistic thought,' Olga said when I told her about my dream and my suspicions. 'Sometime reality can be much better than the nicest dream.'

I wanted to see it before I could believe it, just like God. It took nearly two weeks to make a hole in the wall surrounding Anton's controlled sexuality. One night when we were alone in his house, he suddenly started to explore my body with the nervous hands of a novice sculptor. I felt Anton's wet mouth close around my nipple. I shivered on the edge of discharging and secretly hoped that our bodies would find the point where time stood still. We hadn't even fully unclothed when he reached that point alone.

It seems a dream was better than reality.

While the uncertain existence of God tormented my mind, societal

development followed quickly one after the other. Reality was just like a kaleidoscope: each time you looked at it from a different point of view, you saw something different. For me the worst thing about the post-communist era was the resulting division. The party leaders had always hidden their riches from the eyes of the people with high fences, but the new rich didn't do that. They actually showed off their Rolexes, their villa's and their expensive cars.

Under the reign of the communist party, which had given itself the new name 'socialist', Bulgaria embraced the worst sort of capitalism that existed. The entire social support system fell away to make place for a Darwinist survival principle. It was an unmistakable paradox: during communism, most people had enough money, but could hardly buy anything with it, now the stores were full of Western products, but most people had no money. Prices had risen so much that the Bulgarian currency, the Lev, had become worthless. My grandmother had been saving her whole life assuming that I could buy myself a washing machine or other expensive appliance. The extortionate inflation meant that all savings disappeared like snow melting in the sun. It had been deposited in a bank account, but yet it had disappeared. The only thing I could buy was a toaster.

I felt so bad for my grandmother, because I knew she had lovingly deposited the money in the bank account each month in the hope that years later I could buy myself something nice. I couldn't come home with a toaster. My grandmother would be ashamed that she hadn't saved more money, even though she hadn't eaten expensive bananas for years but saved the money for me instead. I couldn't find the words to say how much I appreciated it, even though the savings were of no value.

During my final year at grammar school I earned a lot of money as a private tutor for English and German. From the moment that it was no longer forbidden to travel to the West, everyone wanted to travel and speak foreign languages. I had that many customers that I could have opened my own school. Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to get rich quick, because this final year at school was very important for my further career. I had to get the highest grade for nearly all my subjects, if I wanted to guarantee myself a place at university.

I never had much chance to spend my savings, since my parents bought everything for me and my dates paid all the restaurant bills. A woman was never allowed to pay the bill, because the men were immediately insulted if you proposed this. So, I diligently deposited all my money in a bank account, until I heard rumours that most banks were about to go bankrupt. I went to withdraw my money straight away. Unfortunately, I wasn't the only one who thought it was safer to

put your money in an old sock. It was like mass hysteria: hundreds of people stood in line waiting to withdraw their savings. Some people in line claimed the cash registers were almost empty. I wondered if there was any point in waiting. At least I had made up a good excuse why I urgently needed the money.

After waiting for hours, it was my turn. The counter clerk looked at me gravely.

'Everyone has a reason, but we do not have any more cash.'

'You can't be serious. Look, I have it in writing how much I have deposited in my bank account and that I can access this any time I want.'

'I'm not blind, but you're not getting your money. At least, not for the time being. Next in line please.'

I sighed and backed off. These types of scenes belonged to communism and not to capitalism. Who had promised us it would all get better? Only the rewriting of history had had a positive outcome, because now no one had to fear those ridiculous political exams, in which they asked for all the ins and outs of the communist party. Yeltsin, the first Russian President after the revolution, gave a typical example of the questions we were asked in his biography.

The examiner: 'On which page and in which part of *Das Kapital* does Marx talk about the commodity-money relations?'

Yeltsin: 'I was absolutely certain that he had never even read Marx and didn't know on which page and which part it was mentioned and even had no idea what commodity-money relations meant, so I replied half-jokingly, half seriously: in the second part, page 387. I said it without thinking.'

'Great, you have an excellent knowledge of Marx,' the examiner said and Yeltsin was admitted to the local party committee.

We no longer had to know about Marx, but instead about survival techniques. Suddenly there were shortages in everything, even the daily groceries. Luckily, we were no longer prohibited from travelling to the West and my mother would bring back butter and cheese from France when she toured as a manager with her folk dance group. Otherwise we had to wait in endless queues.

Do you know what democracy is? You can choose which queue to wait in,' Olga joked. Unfortunately, we were already familiar with that freedom. I would have preferred for something substantial to have changed and preferably right now.

I was too impatient to waste my time standing in queues and tried a different approach. A new admirer who worked in a small supermarket was prepared to save anything I wanted behind the counter. My parents considered this to be a creative solution until they saw my boyfriend.

‘He has no brains and his legs are too short,’ was my mother’s commentary.

I usually paid no attention to her scathing remarks, but this time it made me think. She couldn’t have assessed that he had no brains that quickly, but his legs were indeed very short. It was strange that I hadn’t noticed that before. I especially abhorred his smoke-stained teeth and didn’t want to kiss him for that reason. When I confessed this to him, he turned up the next day with teeth so white that I couldn’t believe my eyes. They had been whitened by a dentist with a super modern laser machine. What was the next step? A prosthetic leg? I thought he was coming dangerously close and ended the relationship. There was no point starting something with a man my parents didn’t approve of in a country where family always came first.

The next day I joined a long queue for groceries.

A glass tower of prejudices

Materialism and individualism were the new magic words of the post-communist society. You hardly ever saw propaganda images of Bulgarian workers gratefully shaking the hands of Russian soldiers. The facades were painted and draped with advertising, which played to a completely different set of emotions. Not to brotherhood and solidarity, but to satisfying material desires. We no longer swam like a school of fish towards the clear light of communism. Everyone went their own way.

I had no idea that the moment for a radical change in my life had nearly arrived. I could only see what was happening within the limits of my own horizon, but the change came from far away.

I met him during that disastrous post-communist period, marked by scarcity, unemployment and insecurity. I fell for his white shirt, which shone so brightly in the black lights at the disco. I was also wearing a pristine white top and it seemed to attract him as if I was the only ray of light in the dark. At first glance, he didn't seem to be my type, but our shirts were in some strange way attracted to each other. He came closer and started to dance across from me. His sharp jawline exuded masculinity, his moves were sexy and his tight bum caught the admiration of a few other women. He asked if he could buy me a drink. I wanted to say 'no', but funnily enough I landed next to him on a bar stool. Had I gone crazy: I was following a luminous shirt, while the man who wore it wasn't my type?

Luckily this Dutch tourist didn't turn out to be a pushy and conceited macho. Frank seemed to be more of a charmer with a see-through shirt: he gave a piece of himself bare, but not completely. That made him interesting, just like his smile and sense of humour.

This was Frank's first time in Bulgaria and all his friends thought he was mad to travel to an unknown country for winter sports, since he had always skied in France and Austria.

'But it's not so bad here, even though I've experienced a few strange things,' he said. 'Our airplane had to divert to an airport on the Black Sea because of fog. We slept in a hotel with broken windows and no water, about 300 km from our travel destination. The hotel was actually closed and not prepared for visitors in the winter. We were picked up by a shoddy bus the next day. After driving for hours we were allowed to stop for some fresh air, because the driver had to repair one of the parts. We took photos of him lying under the bus doing his repairs. After a few hour's delay, we finally arrived at our winter sports destination. The skiing is perfect, but I keep on being harassed by strangers wanting to exchange dirty money and by

prostitutes in the hotel. One even had the audacity last night of knocking on my door. I was half asleep when I opened the door. She asked if I wanted sex straight away.'

We talked, drank and danced all night. He looked at me almost hypnotically with his emerald green eyes. While we danced, I smelled his skin for the first time. The smell was so pure and masculine that I could imagine I would enjoy being intimate with him.

At about 4 a.m. I decided it was time to go to bed. I had to sleep for a few hours, because I had a rescue skiing competition the next day, which consisted of a number of intense components. The most intense was the slalom, where we had to transport a wounded skier on a sledge between the flags in as short a times as possible. The course was at the top of a steep black run, which sometimes got pretty icy. However, that didn't bother me as much as the orientation test in the woods. Luckily one of the other girls in the team was handy with a compass. If we followed her blindly we usually reached the target without missing any checkpoints.

I was disappointed that Frank couldn't come and watch the competition. He had booked a daytrip to Plovdiv to admire my city's old architecture.

'I would very much like to see you again,' he said. 'Shall we meet tonight in the same bar?'

'I think you'll be too tired, because it's quite a long journey. Going back and forth on one day is pretty exhausting.'

'I'll be there at 10 p.m., dead or alive.' Frank smiled. His teeth were just as white as his shirt.

The next morning I heard the voice of our trainer, but I didn't want to get up. Was it that time already? How long had I slept?

He gave me a shove. 'Did you spend too much time last night drinking?' His remark startled me and I opened my eyes. He smiled. It was just a joke. As usual he had no idea that I left the building after I had put on my pyjamas and pretended to sleep. He never checked twice and I could spend as much time in the discos as I wanted until my legs started hurting.

I pulled on my white ski pants and instinctively thought of Frank's clean white shirt. I was surprised at my own association. Why did I keep thinking about him, when he wasn't my type? Frank had a certain charm, with which he made you feel at ease and yet he didn't bear any resemblance to the prince Charming from my fantasies. Although he was tall and slim, and he looked muscular, his shoulders just weren't broad enough for my taste. And his haircut wasn't really trendy, despite all that gel in his hair.

At the sound of the starting pistol I tensed my muscles. I had to give it my all to win this competition. We were the favourites. Last

year we had just missed out by mission the last slalom gate, but we now had a real chance.

My alcohol driven engine worked that good that my team mates could hardly keep up with me during the first part, cross country skiing with special broad ski's. The other components also went well, even though I kept on feeling my heart in my mouth. We had the best time at the finish, but we had to wait for the score of a few other teams. When the other team missed a slalom gate, we knew for sure: we had won the national title for rescue skiing!

'Do you know if you're going to go on your date, because it's 10 p.m. already,' my teammate Snezana said. She already knew Frank wasn't my type based on the way he looked, but that I hadn't laughed as much as last night.

'I'm not sure. What's the point of flirting with someone whose leaving for a far-away country the next morning? It can't work out. If I go to him, I might miss out on my prince Charming tonight.'

'The chance you'll meet your prince Charming tonight, is almost nihil,' Snezana assured me with the emphasis on the word nihil. 'You've been on the lookout for him since you joined the team. Go and see Frank. At least you'll have a nice evening, if you ask me.'

I nodded in agreement and went to make myself up. After taking every item of clothing out of my suitcase, putting them on and taking them off again, I stuck to a sexy shirt with a deep cleavage and a tight skirt.

'Isn't that too much?' I asked Snezana.

'No, go, because it's nearly 11 p.m. I doubt he's still waiting for you.'

When I entered the disco I nearly bumped into Frank, who was making his way to the exit.

'It's you,' he said surprised. 'I was about to leave. Why are you so late?'

'I wanted to test how much you liked me. If a man leaves after just half an hour, then he's not too keen on the woman he's waiting for.'

'Aha,' Frank nodded at my theory. It didn't sound like agreement, but the rest of the evening he didn't talk about time at all. Until it was nearly morning and he had to catch the bus to the airport. That was the first time he looked at his watch again. The hours had flown by in chatting and dancing more and more intimately. The last tune the DJ played was 'I've Been Thinking About You' by London Beat.

> We must have been stone crazy
> When we thought we were just friends.
> 'Cause I miss you, baby.

And I've got those feelings again.
I guess I'm all confused about you,
I feel so in love.
Oh, baby, what can I do?

The chorus 'I've been thinking about you' echoed repeatedly through the speakers. It couldn't have been more apt, so soon before our definite goodbyes.

'I'll write to you and phone you,' Frank said and gave me some tapes with Dutch music as a memento. 'I hope you'll think about me every now and then when you listen to the music.'

'I imagine I will, because I don't know any other Dutch people,' I smiled.

'I love you,' he whispered in my ear.

'I'm not in love yet, but I do think you're very sweet,' I whispered back and gave him a going-away kiss. Somewhere in the background we could still hear London Beat's song:

Suddenly we're strangers,
I watch you walking away.
She was my one temptation,
Oh, I did not want her to stay
Deep down, I'm still confused about you
…
What good is being here without you?
I've been thinking about you…

The next few months I received many cards with hugging bears, kissing giraffes, joined hearts and many more kitschy images. I jumped at every ring of the phone and ran towards it. If it was Frank, then my day couldn't get any better. He always talked so sweet and used such loving words, that I stopped doubting if he was truly my knight in shining armour who I had been waiting on for so long. There was just one practical problem: my knight was separated from me by 2500 km.

In the meantime, everything in Bulgaria was changing. There were less and less things which reminded people of life during communism. The large red star on the roof of the party building had been taken down and a start was made with the mass destruction of communist monuments. The smaller statues of Lenin and Stalin were destroyed by hand, there was lots of dynamite needed for the medium-sized ones and the largest just fell into disrepair because the government knew it would cost millions to remove them. Where they

used to have giant paintings of hardworking labourers hanging in the main streets, now there were adverts for whisky, surrounded with beautiful half-naked women or fast cars, which were also advertised by half-naked women.

The people had also changed in a short time. They were deeply disappointed in the new reality, which provided no security. During communism, there hadn't been enough jobs for everyone, but everyone had a job. You only realised the true size of hidden unemployment after the mass lay-offs after the revolution. Suddenly this unknown luxury had been done away with, because everything had to be reformed to fit the Western model.

We were clearly playing catch-up. The scarcity of tropical fruit was solved in no time. We could no longer imagine that during communism the queues for bananas had been so long that they would pass through several streets. I could vaguely recall that my sister and I had waited in line for hours without exchanging a word because someone might tell the saleswoman that we were sisters. Then we wouldn't be allowed to buy one kilo each, but just one kilo for the entire family. The bananas they sold were always green and we would eat them straight away because we couldn't wait until they ripened. Some of my friends didn't even realise they turned yellow.

The local market was overrun with unknown products after the collapse of the Wall, such as peanut butter which we didn't know what to do with because the pot didn't say you could spread it on bread. The French cheeses were also an attraction. Olga treated me to some brie, but first removed the white layer of cheese under the assumption that this was some kind of soft packaging. Packets of chewing gum with pictures of naked ladies were sold all over the place. They were so hard that you had a sore jaw from chewing the rest of the day, but many people didn't mind because of the surprising pictures in the packets. The entire country seemed obsessed by sex: everywhere on the streets there were people selling erotic newspapers and poor-quality magazines. Some even sold the Playboy, but for people on an average salary this glossy magazine was simply too expensive. Where they used to have pictures of the party leaders hanging in the offices, they now shamelessly hung calendars of naked models. I had to admit they were more photogenic, but I could imagine that the older generation did not appreciate this total lack of morals.

Most Bulgarians had discovered within the year that freedom of speech didn't help them much, but that free entrepreneurship, which was no longer prohibited, did. Commercial companies shot out the ground like mushrooms. The state run stores were just as empty as they had been previously, but no one minded, because they could find

everything they needed in the private mini stores. Because they could not pay the high rent otherwise, most enterprising citizens started out in renovated garages and all kinds of booths. They would pile their goods up in high towers and if you tried to get something, then the whole tower would fall down.

Those who could not afford to rent a unit, could always display their wares on a stall. The whole city had turned into one large market. There was no resting place for the eyes due to the large amount of clothes, cosmetics, shoes and household appliances. The owners of the stalls also tried to display as many products as possible in as small a space as possible. If you wanted to buy Western cosmetics you often had to bend down under a tied piece of string, hung full of bra's and underpants, to pay for your goods. If it was sexy lingerie, then I didn't mind so much, but often there were D-cup bra's and size XXL underpants dangling above my head.

There were also a large amount of book stalls, were they displayed philosophical books next to science fiction novels and magazines with busty blonds lay next to the Bible. There was also a lively trade in military items in the city centre, gold coins, army uniforms and souvenirs with communist images, which mostly attracted the tourists.

Western chains like McDonald's and Pizza Hut had also got foot on the ground. The customers poured in. Everything that was Western was trendy and money played no role in these cases. Prices had seemed to have lost their grip on reality anyhow and the economy was more out of control than ever. No one could live on a normal monthly wage, but most people earned on the side and managed this way. Only the small towns were in dire straits after the crash of the state monopoly because of the complete lack of job opportunities. In such desolate places, Greek and Turkish businessmen set up sewing workshops with working conditions which dated from the last century. No windows, no ventilation, poor lighting, ban on union membership and compulsory overtime. Yet no one complained. The communist unions had more or less been dismantled and the employees themselves were too afraid of losing their jobs.

When I read the latest of Frank's letters my heart started to beat faster: he was coming to Bulgaria to see me again. I didn't expect my parents' blessing, but they agreed to let him stay at our home.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw Frank walk through the sliding doors. A little while later he pressed me against his hard chest. It felt so right, even though I hardly knew him. I mostly knew him from his letters, in which he had written that he missed me every second and it was as if I could feel that yearning when he held me in his arms.

Frank was surprised at the changes around him.

'Has anything stayed the same in my absence?'

'Yes, our prejudices,' I grinned, thinking back to our conversation in which Frank tried to break my glass tower or prejudices. He was dismayed with how much contempt we treated the gypsies.

'Just imagine you had been born a gypsy. Would you like it if everyone treated you like trash?'

'Frank, you don't understand. They are lazy, thieves and they smell. Just go and stand next to a gypsy in packed bus.'

'They are poor and they can't have a shower every day like you can.'

'I don't think they even have a shower in their slums.'

'That's even worse. But surely they can't help being born poor gypsies in a ghetto?'

It was true about the ghetto. I hadn't realised there was a ghetto on the outskirts of my city until I once got lost in my car and ended up there. It was so surreal: muddy streets with potholes, naked children running through the puddles, men with no teeth, women without decent clothing, houses that were disintegrating. Even though I had locked all the car doors, I felt so scared in this miserable environment that I had tears in my eyes. I was scared they would wreck my car. A few gypsy children ran after the car for a while, but they didn't throw stones or anything else. Perhaps they had wanted to do some begging.

I drove shivering out of the ghetto. I had lived in this city for 18 years and I had considered such scenes impossible. This was a hermetically isolated world, even though it was not surrounded by a wall.

I remember my parents trying to teach me manners by threatening me with this ghetto: 'You can't sing at the table, otherwise you will marry a gypsy,' they said each time I hummed a song. Even though that sounded like a serious threat at the time, it only now got through to me the ghetto was worse than even my most distressing representation.

'Aha, your prejudices!' Frank said in a neutral tone of voice.

We both knew there was no use in discussing this again, because even sensible arguments would not take away the stubborn prejudices about gypsies that every Bulgarian had been raised with. Now that the communists no longer had work for the gypsies, the cheeky minority would steal all the manhole covers to sell them as scrap metal. You had to watch out if you didn't want to break your neck.

The gypsies hadn't just targeted state-owned facilities, but also those privately owned. They took down the chicken wire on a large plot of ground we had been given back by the government. They even took the dirt grid away that we used to wipe our feet on. My parents

decided not to get a new one, because they knew it would be gone the next day.

The communist ideal had made room for traders and millionaires with no education and the gypsies apparently wanted to keep up in this respect. They profited from the fact that the almighty party no longer controlled the lives of its citizens and in a smart way played to their uncertainty about the future. Because who was better at predicting the future than the gypsies? I was approached on a daily basis by dark-skinned fortune-tellers and palm readers. That usually went according to a standard procedure. In first instance, they would hint that they only had good predictions for me. When I politely refused, they would follow me for a while and they eventually went on the lookout for a new victim. But not before they had cursed me such as: 'May you remain an old spinster and may you never have any children'. Of course, time would tell, but seeing as several cursed girlfriends had been both marriage material and fertile, I wasn't that worried.

Frank and I walked along the streets that were filled with free entrepreneurs. One sold sunflower seeds, the other had placed a set of scales on the pavement to get people to weigh themselves in exchange for money, a third had opened a repair shop in his garage. A large sign hung across his door: 'We fix everything. Knock hard, because the doorbell doesn't work.'

The best thing about free entrepreneurship was that everyone tried their hardest to look like a Western businessman. More and more English signs appeared in hotels, restaurants and shops. I laughed at their broken English: 'Women are asked not to have any children in the bar.' In a hotel, I saw another gem: 'Toilet out of order, please use the floor below.'

Because of lack of money all shops sold 'original copies' of the well-known brands. Most salespeople didn't even want to admit that they were counterfeit goods and all those people that bought Nike sneakers, Chanel perfumes and Ray-Ban sunglasses, it didn't matter.

The memories of the past disappeared just as quickly as the largest part of the Berlin Wall.

Before we left Sofia, I wanted Frank to meet my cousin. I was curious how Julia as a city girl had settled in her husband's small village. My aunt told me the military factory where her husband worked had switched from producing weapons to making consumer products and that their income was eaten away by the sky-high inflation. Now they could no longer survive just on his salary, they had to grow potatoes, vegetables and fruit in their vegetable patch around their house. They had also acquired a few chickens for the eggs.

Julia's parents, who drove us to the village, were clearly still not happy that their only daughter had married a farmer. They had exchanged the rickety Trabant for a Fiat, but there was no progress to be seen in the village. The third hand Fiat sounded like it needed to be repaired, but at least they drove in style in a Western car.

On the bendy road to the village my uncle tried some time to overtake a tractor. That failed at each attempt because of his wife's instructions. Long live emancipation! We finally ended up in a herd of sheep that was crossing the road and we had to stop. That brought back the calm in the car.

Fifteen minutes later we were once again behind the tractor's smelly exhaust fumes. This time our driver made a decisive turn of the steering wheel. A car coming from the opposite direction signed with his lights. Driven by a primeval instinct, my uncle slammed the brakes. Frank had no idea what was happening, but every Bulgarian knew this was a warning for a police control. About 100 metres along the road a car with radar equipment was parked in the bushes. Once he was out of sight of the policeman my uncle also used his headlights to warn other road users for the impending danger. Together secretly against authority, this was the best remnant of communism. It was nearly the only form of solidarity that still existed in a society that was trying its best to become a copy of the West.

Julia looked like a real farmer with her blue overalls and freshly picked green beans in her hands. I hardly recognized her when I saw her for the first time in her vegetable patch. Her husband arrived in a rusty Russian Lada. They were happy it still drove, because they did not have any money for a new car. Julia told us excitedly about her new life. She sometimes found the village boring, but something great was about to happen: she was pregnant. Her husband was just as silent as when I had met him first. His lagging behind with regards to the latest fashion had only increased.

Frank thought it was interesting to walk around a real Bulgarian village, but I couldn't wait to leave. The next two weeks we focused on our young love, which took place under the all-seeing eyes of my parents. We longed for a little bit of privacy, but we weren't allowed any. After some tears and begging we were finally allowed to spend one week together with just the two of us. The next day we took the train to the Black Sea, afraid my parents would change their mind. 'If you come back pregnant you can find somewhere else to live,' my mother said when we left.

The next morning Frank brought me breakfast in bed, completely naked, but wearing a tie. I thought that was both funny and sexy at the same time. I couldn't resist a romantic stuck inside the body of a playboy. After the breakfast, he turned the uninviting bathroom into a

room full of candles and filled the bath with champagne. It was the first time that I had literally and figuratively got drunk from pleasure.

While I dried myself, Frank pressed my back against the wall. I shivered from excitement by the power he exuded. The hard ground under my feet turned into quick sand. His stubble grated against my cheeks with tender determination. The next moment his sensual tongue weakened all my muscles. He pushed his tongue teasing and tasting my mouth, as if he was suggesting that he could do the same to me elsewhere. My fingers moved in slow motion along his firm thighs towards his swollen penis. I felt dizzy with desire. He pressed his muscular thigh between my legs and that brought out such a sensual feeling in me that things seemed to speed up. My muscles were overwhelmed by an endless wave of contractions.

After we had experienced how much our bodies enjoyed being together, we couldn't stay away from each other. Yet I still didn't want to give up my virginity. Why would I risk my parents kicking me out of the house if we also fulfilled our needs this way?

If a fortune teller had predicted that I would fall in love with a foreigner and that I would follow him to a country that I hardly knew anything about, I wouldn't have believed a word of it. I was about to go to university, I had my pick of boyfriends and since the new government had started to return expropriated properties our family belonged to the nouveau riche. We suddenly owned a shop, a wine cellar, stately homes and a lot of land, which meant that after university I could live on the profits of the inherited possessions. This was also the reason all my friends said I was being foolish when I told them I was moving to the Netherlands.

It didn't worry me, because after the romantic weekend at the Black Sea I no longer doubted that I had met my knight in shining armour. My heart had already travelled a long distance and I thought it was natural for my body to follow my heart. To my great surprise my parents didn't object to my emigrating that much. My mother did warn me that I would be disappointed.

'You don't know the language, you have no friends and no work. You are kidding yourself that your love for this man will make everything all right, but it will be a question of survival. And what happens if you two fight? You don't know what he's like when he becomes angry.'

'You're right, I don't know, but I'm not afraid of that. You once said yourself that a fight in a relationship is like the herbs in a dish: it makes it spicy and exciting. Besides you can always make up after a fight. Sometime not with words, but it always works out in bed.'

I saw my mother freeze. Even the tiniest of sexual hints made her restless. She gave up, probably out of fear of possible details how to

solve a fight with seduction.

Dog food and diaries

I don't know how my parents felt when they finally let me go to the Netherlands. Perhaps they were relieved that they had got rid of their rebellious and unpredictable daughter or perhaps they hoped that after my three-month visa expired I would come to my senses and come home.

Frank loved his independence too much to just give it up and I didn't have to try getting my own way. Using the motto of 'We do things this way and that way in the Netherlands' I was virtually gagged. Our fights were usually settled in bed and then discussed them. Both of us didn't actually mind fighting because we knew what they led to. Making love to him for the first time made me think of my bungee jump from the hot air balloon: it was very liberating; the feeling of fear had gone. Our bodies moved in the fluid magical rhythm of ebb and flow. His kisses electrified my senses and the excitement spread in shockwaves through my body. My lips trembled, my hair whirled around my face at every boisterous movement and I flowed like an uncorked bottle of champagne.

In my eyes, the Netherlands was a country of dolls houses with neat gardens, in which the growth of the violets was observed by gnomes. The first time I went to school to learn Dutch, I couldn't find the way back home, because all the streets with their terraced houses looked so much alike. There was nothing left for me to do to admit my defeat and call Frank to come to pick me up.

On the way back I saw a sign with 'poor road surface'. I instantly thought of the enormous holes in the Bulgarian roads and slammed the brakes so hard that Frank was thrown forward. It turned out to be a barely perceptible bump. It surprised me that someone would have thought it necessary to place such a deceiving sign.

I also thought it was strange that I had to buy a ticket for the dunes. Walking in the countryside was free-of-charge in Bulgaria. You hardly had woods surrounding Amsterdam and if you wanted to go for a walk in the woods, you also had to pay for it! I missed Bulgaria's mountains and the wilderness. Here everything was signposted with automobile association signs, wooden benches were placed all over the place and asphalt roads went through the dunes. There were no woods to be found without information signs, because just imagine you didn't learn anything about nature! Every now and then I saw edible mushrooms but Frank wouldn't let me pick them. I was only allowed to admire them from a distance. Dutch wildlife in a display case: you could look, but not touch. In Bulgaria, we considered nature to be an endless food factory: blueberries, chanterelle mushrooms,

prunes, wild strawberries, hazelnuts: we always came home with bags full of food. Here I would sit down on a forestry bench with a sigh to look at the pretty mushrooms. I would have preferred to enjoy them with my mouth instead of my eyes, but being able to control your natural instincts was part of a successful integration.

Life behind the dykes still had some big surprises in store for me, like an indoor ski slope, not far from our house. People skied on a kind of rolling carpet. A little bit further up a former rubbish tip had been covered up with an industrial building. Inside you could ski on fake snow. That gave a more authentic feeling than a dry slope or a magic carpet. For kids that is, because the short slope made an adult feel like a midget.

I didn't feel at home either in other places in the Netherlands. Like at the unemployment office, that wanted to keep me registered no matter what, even when I had embarked on a study. In Bulgaria I would have been written out straight away, but in the Netherlands this wasn't possible. Here it wasn't the people who made the rules, but the computers who refused to remove someone from the system. Luckily, I could put things in perspective by reading the newspapers. A resident of Heerlen had received 83 letters from a benefits agency. One on day, to be clear. My correspondence with the unemployment office paled into insignificance.

Of all the agencies, I feared the immigration police the most and especially the arrogant attitude of the officers who had to decide about my residency permit. The first time, Frank had brought all possible paperwork such as pay slips and mortgage papers to show that he could afford a foreign bride. If someone didn't meet the income requirements, then his love was sent home with hesitation. That is why there were probably so many men showing off their Thai, Russian or Filipino women: not everyone could afford a foreign bride.

I was allowed to stay, but the officer warned Frank in my presence to watch out for East-European women who were after his money. I couldn't believe that the officer said that, while I was there. As if I was some cheap prostitute. I was raging and secretly hoped that the officer would marry a Dutch woman who would leave him and make him pay alimony for years to come.

At parties and birthdays people always asked me what I thought of the Netherlands. I didn't get the feeling anyone was really interested in my opinion. Everyone wanted to hear the standard story: that I enjoyed living in such a prosperous country. The Dutch were convinced from the outset that I must be happy to have escaped the poverty in Bulgaria. They presumed that everyone there was poor, even though they had never been there. One acquaintance claimed that you could get your driving license in the Eastern Bloc by driving

around a banana tree a few times. My counter argument that there were no banana trees in Bulgaria he rejected as 'weak'.

The eating habits at birthdays were new to me. In Bulgaria, no matter how rickety the table was it was always stowed with food and treats. In the Netherlands, the hostess would go around the group with a tray filled with small bites to eat. Nodding meant 'yes' here, in Bulgaria it meant 'no'. Shaking my head to say 'yes' had become such a habit that at the start I was often passed over.

Despite such pitfalls my integration went well. At first I didn't know what a diary was, but I finally bought one. And if someone wanted to make an appointment, I would flip through the pages in concentration looking for a space, just like the Dutch. I couldn't find a good Bulgarian translation to explain to my parents what a diary was used for. In southern countries where chaos, intuition and spontaneity ruled, there was no use for a diary.

Everything in advance and planning things as much as possible, this lay in the nature of the Dutch people. Many people booked their summer holiday a year in advance. One year! You had to have superior brains to be able to look that far ahead. I was just happy being able to plan two months in advance.

The pinnacle of Dutch planning was a computer programme with Frank's work shifts. It was an overview from 1990 to the year 3000. Steelworks *Hoogovens* apparently believed in the loyalty of its employees, till death do us part.

'Oh, it's always nice to be able to see from Heaven that you were actually supposed to be working on a certain day, but that you now have a day off,' Frank replied. 'And this is also a nice coincidence: the day I turn 50 I have a day off.'

Thanks to my light skin I wasn't discriminated against that much, except on the labour market. All my job applications received a reply that they had chosen someone else. A car dealership told me that, despite my good credentials, I wasn't suitable because I was a foreigner. What would his customers say if his secretary spoke with a foreign accent? I was a little bit angry for his reasons for turning me down, but on the other hand I appreciated his honesty. At least he said what the other employers thought, but didn't dare to say out in the open.

At my wit's end I applied for a position as a freelance employee for the North Holland Daily newspaper. Not that I believed I would be hired after one year in the Netherlands. But my covering letter impressed them. Later on, I heard it was not because of the content. 'We all wanted to see which idiot had written their job application on pink paper,' the editor-in-chief said.

Not knowing the rules of a country apparently had its advantages,

because I was given the chance to prove myself. After a few test stories I was allowed to work for the newspaper. As the newcomer, I was of course given the stories no one else wanted to do. A report about an animal show, a story about an association of elderly ladies, a couple that had been married for 50 years, the annual harness racing and the jumble sale on Queen's Day. I slowly started to see my opportunities grow. For interviews I often went to places that no regular person gets to see: from a prison to a chocolate factory and from receptions at ministries to the deck of a tanker navigating through the ports of Rotterdam.

Journalism accelerated my integration, but even though I tried as hard as I could, I still wasn't accepted as 'one of them'. Dutch people looked at me in surprise when I said my Dalmatian ate the same food as we did. 'Doesn't it make his breath stink? No? But surely it can't be healthy.' And I in turn was surprised that they bought all kinds of colourful dog and cat biscuits. Cats can't recognize shapes and they are nearly colour-blind, but apparently, the pet food industry ignored this. As long as the pet owners believed that the colourful plant-based biscuits were better for an animal that was a natural carnivore. All that artificial food resulted in 40% of the dogs being overweight and they produced large stools that I had never seen before in Bulgaria.

When I brought my Dalmatian over to the Netherlands and gave him a bowl of dried dog food, he looked at me strangely.

'Welcome to a prosperous country, sweetie,' I told him. 'This is the start of your integration. Lesson 2 is that you are no longer allowed to pee against car tires, because in the Netherlands their car is sacred. Lesson 3: dogs are to be kept on the leash as much as possible, so I will have to put you on the leash from now on. You can also forget running around in the mountains, because there are no mountains here. Don't look so sad. I also have good news. Seeing as it's not common for dogs to sleep in doghouses in the back garden, you can sleep in the house. Now that's a treat, isn't it? Look at it from a positive point of view and eat those biscuits.'

My dog had to live in a terraced house. I don't think he thought it was a problem, but when I told my mother the size of a regular family home she replied: 'Gosh, child, do you live in such a house? Those can't be rooms, they're prison cells!'

I had to laugh, but my mother sounded overanxious as usual.

'Don't worry dear. Your father and I will sell some land and then you will get money to buy something decent. I'll also send you some money soon for your study, so you don't have to depend on Frank.'

'Mum, when you live with someone, you are dependent on them anyway. Frank doesn't care about money and I can spend it as I wish.'

'It doesn't work that way, my child. When you don't have any

money, you're dependent. I want to spare you that.'

I laughed at this old-fashioned way of thinking, but let her pay my journalism training in full. If I had stayed in Bulgaria, my parents would also have bought me a house and a car, because that is what all Bulgarian parents did if they could afford it.

On top of the world

My parents didn't want me to be co-habiting for too long, because it still wasn't accepted in Bulgaria.

'Don't you two love each other enough?' my mother wanted to know during every telephone conversation. It was only when she finally gave up five years later, that we started to talk about marriage ourselves, but then only in the way of jokes to test the water. Our relationship was so perfect that subconsciously I was worried that marriage would ruin that. Could a marriage ruin the magic?

Frank wasn't worried: 'Infatuation eventually turns into love and that is just as nice a feeling.'

'If you look around you and see the number of divorces, then you might understand why I'm scared,' I told him. 'Before you start declaring that something like that won't happen to us, I would like to point out that all newlyweds think like that. Apparently, the infatuation soon dies after a marriage, because you are bound to each other and gasping for freedom. It would be a nightmare living with someone I was no longer in love with.'

'Mer, there's no 100% security in live. You could lose everything you have tomorrow.'

I didn't believe Frank, because I felt like I had everything under control. I wasn't aware that my life was made up of lots of pieces of a puzzle until I lost one of the most important pieces. It happened so suddenly that at first I didn't know how to react. I knew one thing for sure: my life would never be complete after the unexpected death of my father. There was just one ray of light: my father's age didn't give him the right to leave this earth, but his life did. Not many people had lived such an intense life by the age of 44 that they could close their eyes with peace of mind. Why do we measure a person's life in years? I wondered. It's the most worthless scale there is. Some people are already dying from their 30th onwards due to lack of ideals and courage. At least my father had made the most of every opportunity not to live a boring life. He was like a candle burning at both ends: it burned quickly, but gave a stronger and nicer flame.

Frank didn't scrap marriage from his wish list. I was still hesitant, but from everything that had happened I was better able to put my doubts in perspective. It seemed I would have to accept that I could never be certain if we would still be happy with each other after 20 years. Perhaps that was the charm of such a commitment, because without doubts a relationship would become boring and predictable.

'Mer, infatuation is like a firework that lights the night sky, but disappears soon after. Do you choose the fleeting splendour of a

firework or the solid foundation of a legal commitment?' Frank asked.

Previously I would have sworn that I wanted the fireworks, but I seemed I was able to radically change my mind. I had now experienced true love: it was not just a burning desire, a close friendship or a drug that you can become addicted to, but it was the sum of all these things combined with an invisible force that held them together.

'Frank, if you want me to be your wife, then you'll have to think of an original proposal. Otherwise it won't happen.'

He laughed confidently, because he was never short of creativity.

I had no idea when Frank had planned his proposal, even though I had the sneaking suspicion that he was up to something. We flew to America to ski in the Rocky Mountains and after that we stopped in Las Vegas to warm ourselves up. I suddenly realized: I want to get married in this fairy tale city. Everything was possible here. A sea of light in the desert, a place where rich business men felt just as much at home as a carpenter did, where you were accepted both in a gala dress and a pair of jeans, where you could see a fake volcano erupt in the main street and see ships sink, where the Eiffel Tower, the Venetian canals, the New York sky scrapers and the pyramid of Giza were replicated and where on the rotating top of the 350 meter high Stratosphere the prettiest lit up city in the world lay at your feet.

Frank dragged me along many different wedding chapels to see what they looked like inside. I had a strange premonition that something was about to happen.

'Frank, no joking,' I warned him. 'As long as you don't get it in your head to marry right here and now without family. My side would never forgive me; besides I wouldn't even want to.'

'Relax, baby. I just want to ask something in this wedding chapel. Perhaps you could wait outside?'

Wait outside? Before I could say anything, Frank went into the white wedding chapel. I walked around the garden in circles, constantly checking my watch and asking what was taking so long. I was that nervous, it was as if I was about to get married.

Frank finally came out.

'Done,' he said. The lights of Las Vegas reflected in his eyes.

'What's done?'

'You'll see. You'll need to wait until 8 p.m. tonight. Wear something nice, because it's going to be a special evening.'

My heart was in my throat, but no matter how much I pressed, Frank wouldn't divulge his secret.

At exactly 8 p.m. the hotel reception called to let us know there was someone waiting for us. I had no idea who that could be. A very long white limousine was parked outside.

‘For you,’ Frank said.

At the moment, the driver came towards to us and opened the door for me. I slid into the supple leather upholstery and sniffed the air of luxury. The bar, the champagne, the television, the partition between us and the driver, the tinted windows….it was such a peculiar feeling to sit in a car like this and not know where you were going.

‘I have something else for you,’ Frank said and handed me a parcel. It was so large that it could not possibly be a wedding ring.

Out of everything that had come into my mind, a videotape was the last thing I expected. I looked at Frank questioningly, because there was nothing written on the tape. He pointed to the video recorder, which hung under the television.

The first twenty seconds without a picture seemed to last forever. I still had no idea what was on the tape. Suddenly I appeared on screen. I was skiing and Frank was chasing me. A few seconds later we were in Namibia, on top of the highest sand dunes in the world, waiting for the sun to set. Then we were nearly blown off by the strong winds on top of Table Mountain in South Africa, letting ourselves get soaking wet by the Niagara Falls, sitting on camels in Egypt, trying on sombrero hats at a market in Mexico, dancing on a luxury cruise ship in the Caribbean and swinging on vines in the rain forest on the paradise island of Dominica. It has something surreal to see all those quick flashes stuck one after the other. At the end, Frank appeared on the screen: ‘Mer, we have been together and happy for so long, we love adventures and each other. That is why I want to ask you something Will you marry me?’

I was sobbing so much that I couldn’t give an answer.

‘Yes, No, Yes, No,’ constantly flashed on the screen.

Frank hugged me and only then could I say Yes.

The limousine drove past the Excalibur, a gigantic hotel-casino built like a fairy tale castle.

‘Here,’ I pointed. ‘I want to get married here. There is something symbolic, finding your knight in shining armour and getting married in a fairy tale castle.’

After driving past all of Vegas’ attractions for an hour, the driver stopped at the 350-meter-high building The Stratosphere. Frank had booked a table in the rotating restaurant at the top.

The whole of Las Vegas lay at our feet and the rest of the world also.

‘Frank, I don’t know how much it will cost, but we’re going to book this place for our wedding party and show all our friends and family this view.’

Six months later a group of friends and family were singing the

Carpenters' song at 350 meter in the sky, after we had been declared husband and wife at the fairy tale castle. It sounded very off-key, but in any case, we could understand the chorus: 'I'm on top of the world'. I looked at my diamond ring and smiled contentedly. The Priest's words still echoed in my head: 'This ring has no beginning and no end, just like love.'

The next morning my diamond ring had disappeared. There was no one lying next to me in bed. I rubbed my eyes, because I could not believe that this had all been a dream. I was convinced that I had married my knight in shining armour here in Las Vegas. Then why was I not wearing a ring and why was I lying in an empty hotel bed? Had I been so brainwashed during the many years of communist dictatorship that I could only believe in dreams? Dreams only last so long, just ten minutes or thirty minutes, maximum. It was strange that I could have travelled thousands of kilometres' distance in such a short time. It was all so confusing that I was afraid to look in my suitcase for fear there was no wedding dress.

A little while later I had gathered enough courage to carefully open the suitcase. My mother's wedding dress was in in. The wedding dress I wanted to wear at my own wedding after some modernization, because this unique example radiated something symbolic: passing on love from generation to generation.

I heard the door of the hotel room open.

'Good morning, beautiful. I woke up early and I had the jeweller resize your ring.'

I looked at the sparkling diamond ring in Frank's hand. My emotions were still that confused that I didn't know what to think. Yet I felt very lucky. My thoughts had not been manipulated, my thoughts were finally free! Free enough to not have to think for the first time ever.

Note from the author

This is the end of the beginning of the fairy tale that reads like a true story, and also of this true story that reads like a fairy tale. This book is based on real events and facts. I have deliberately chosen to consequently use the term communism instead of socialism, because the West saw Russia and her allies as communist countries, even though in practice they were not that far advanced. The names of characters have been changed to protect their privacy. Any resemblance to real people is purely coincidental.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my father for his wisdom, even if I have not been able to fully exploit it, because he swapped the earthly for the eternal so soon and also my mother who tried to protect me like an angel from unsuitable lovers, fake friends and all possible disappointments.

I thank all my Bulgarian friends who were prepared to share their stories of their youth with me. Although they also had to gather the shards of their broken illusions after the fall of communism and glue them into new ideals, none of us regretted growing up in such a strange society.

I thank all the writers who have enriched me with beauty and inspiration. Writing a book is like exposing yourself, but Oscar Wilde places the risk of lack of understanding in the shoes of the reader: 'All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.'

Finally, I thank my friend and husband Frank. Without his support this book would never have been written, for the simple reason that he didn't always switch the lights off when I got inspiration in the middle of the night to write another few pages.

Many thanks for purchasing my book. Did you enjoy it? If so, please let other readers know and leave a review on Amazon.com. Much appreciated!

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Translation and Publishing: Caroline Morton-Gallagher, Morton International Publishing. Email: morton@online.nl

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